

Original citation:

Cullen, Mairi Ann and Cullen, Stephen Michael (2015) Evaluation of the 'finished at school programme' for ambitious about autism, 2013-2015 : final report. Coventry, UK: University of Warwick. Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research.

Permanent WRAP url:

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/70009>

Copyright and reuse:

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions. Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

A note on versions:

The version presented in WRAP is the published version or, version of record, and may be cited as it appears here. For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: publications@warwick.ac.uk

warwick**publications**wrap

highlight your research

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/>



**Centre for Educational Development,
Appraisal and Research**

**Evaluation of the 'Finished at School Programme' for
Ambitious about Autism, 2013-2015:
Final Report**

**Mairi Ann Cullen
Stephen Cullen**

**Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research
University of Warwick**

April 2015



Supported by:



**Department
for Education**

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1	INTRODUCTION	14
2	DEVELOPMENT OF STAFF SKILLS	21
3	IMPROVED PERSON-CENTRED TRANSITION PLANNING	35
4	IMPACT OF IMPROVED PLANNING ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S TRANSITIONS	58
5	STRONGER ASSESSMENT PROCESSES	77
6	IMPROVED CURRICULUM PATHWAYS	83
7	IMPROVED ACCESS TO COLLEGE LIFE	91
8	CONCLUSIONS	101
9	RECOMMENDATIONS	102

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank all the young people, parents, and hub representatives who gave time to be interviewed for this evaluation. Without their generous support, the evaluation could not have taken place.

We also thank Ambitious about Autism for commissioning the evaluation, and the staff there, especially Yola Jacobsen and Ian Adam Bellamy, for their support of the evaluation and helpful feedback throughout.

We gratefully acknowledge that the consent and assent processes and bespoke information sheets were informed by discussions with Sally Rees, based on her PhD research on transition key working in Wales which involved young people with autism.

In CEDAR, the University of Warwick, we thank Professors Geoff Lindsay and Richard Hastings for their support during the planning phase and throughout the project. We also thank our colleagues, Diana Smith, Shauna Yardley and Alison Baker for administrative support, transcription and data entry.

Ambitious about Autism would like to recognise the support provided by its strategic partners on this project, the Association of Colleges and nasen.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Ambitious about Autism (www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk) is the national charity for children and young people with autism. It provides services, raises awareness and understanding, and campaigns for change. Its vision is, 'to make the ordinary possible for children and young people with autism' and its mission is, 'to help them to learn, thrive and achieve'.

Ambitious about Autism, with its partners, **nasen** and the **Association of Colleges**, was commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) to run the 'Finished at School programme' from April 2013 until March 2015. The programme plan involved four colleges, each working with three partner secondary schools, supporting around 110 young people with autism to make a successful transition to post-school education. The **aim** of the programme was to prepare the general further education sector for the new responsibilities enshrined in the Children and Families Act, 2014. The programme also built on Ambitious about Autism's campaign, 'Finished at School', for more and better post-school educational options for young people with autism. The context of the campaign was that fewer than one in four young people with autism continued their education beyond school¹.

This summary relates to the final report of the programme. A previous, interim report was published in 2014.

Key findings

- The Finished at School programme successfully established four college-led hubs, each working in partnership with local secondary schools and other relevant agencies to improve the transition from school to college of over 110 young people with autism, including complex autism.
- All 45 young people in the project who left school in summer 2014 made successful transitions to continued education. Thirty-four of these were to general further education colleges.

¹ Ambitious about Autism, 2011. *Finished at School. Where next for young people with autism?* The Pears National Centre for Autism Education, London. Ambitious about Autism, 2012. *Finished at School. Creating inclusive colleges for learners with autism. Showcasing good practice.* The Pears National Centre for Autism Education, London.

- The three-day core training² on personal centred approached to transition planning for young people with autism was viewed very positively. For college and school-based participants, it was effective in inspiring improvements to the transition to post-school education of young people with autism.
- Substantial evidence of positive impact was found in relation to the five key areas of project work:
 - Development of staff skills
 - Improved person-centred planning
 - Strengthened assessment processes
 - Development of new curriculum pathways
 - Improved access to college life.
- There was also clear evidence of strategic impact in two areas that bode well for sustainability of the work:
 - In each of the four areas of the country, improved and extended local partnerships were created in and through the project hubs, linking in to pre-existing strategic planning forums and partnership boards.
 - In all four colleges, support for learners with autism was written in to key strategic plans.

Detailed findings

Hub developments

The four colleges were successful in engaging a mix of mainstream (4) and special schools (8) to participate in the project³. It proved hardest to involve mainstream schools in the project. Reasons for this were mainly related to being unable to commit the time required to deliver the project⁴. Each hub developed links with key local strategic forums, such as the local Autism Board, enabling links to be made with a wide range of representatives, including from Health, Social Care and local employers.

Prior to the Finished at School programme, some schools and some colleges involved in the four hubs had already incorporated autism-specific aspects to the

² Designed and delivered by Helen Sanderson Associates with National Development Team for Inclusion.

³ During Year 2, two schools had to withdraw from project activity (but not from proactive transition planning) due to long-term staff illness.

⁴ Cullen, Cullen, Lindsay & Hastings (2014), *Evaluation of the 'Finished at School Programme' for Ambitious about Autism, 2013-2015: Interim Report*. Coventry: CEDAR, University of Warwick.

transition of young people with autism to the further education sector. Others relied on general special educational needs processes. For two schools, one a special school and the other an enhanced resource provision for autism, transition to post-school was a new process as their respective first cohorts of students made this transition in September 2014.

By early March 2014, the target of identifying 110 young people with complex autism to participate in the project had been surpassed. 'Complex' autism was defined operationally as autism plus other special educational needs or disabilities, or autism that was viewed as complex by relevant professionals. Each young person included in the project had to be due to make the transition to post-school education in September 2014 (Cohort 1), September 2015 (Cohort 2) or September 2016 (Cohort 3). The majority of the young people had a statement of special educational needs.

Views of the training

Views of the core three-day training in, 'Person-centred approaches to transition for young people with autism', designed and delivered by Helen Sanderson Associates with National Development Team for Inclusion were very positive. The majority of delegates had some involvement in transition planning for at least one young person with autism (78%) but had not received such training before (71%). At the end of the third day of training, delegates were very positive about the value of the training and about how it had been delivered. At that time, the majority of participants:

- Understood the value of one-page profiles (88%⁵);
- Valued the opportunity to be on training with partnership colleagues (83%);
- Could see how they could use what they had learned (80%);
- Had learned new tools to use in their practice (79%);
- Thought that the person-centred reviews would fit well with their school or college processes (74%);
- Felt confident they knew how to write person-centred outcomes (55%).

The training had been effective in inspiring almost all (92%) to reflect on at least one positive change they planned to make to improve the transition process for learners with autism. Most of these plans centred on adopting a person-centred approach, increasing learner voice and using one-page profiles.

⁵ The percentage given in brackets combines the percentage 'strongly agreeing'/'agreeing' or 'strongly disagreeing'/'disagreeing' (as appropriate) with the relevant statement.

Views of the training expressed during both Year 1 and Year 2 telephone interviews with the college and school leads were also positive overall. By Year 2, it was clear from these interviews, and from the 16 responses⁶ to the follow-up questionnaire, that the training had led to positive developments in the practice of person-centred planning with young people with autism and their parents. In many places, these practices had been generalised to a wider group of young people with special educational needs.

Impact

The Finished at School programme stimulated positive changes in person-centred practices that enhanced the transition to further education in September 2014 of the first cohort of project young people. These encompassed all five areas where the programme aimed to make a positive difference. Further changes in practice were also in place, or planned, to benefit the second, and later, cohorts of young people with autism moving on from school. All the interviewees said they had benefitted from being involved in the Finished at School programme. It was highly valued as an opportunity to test out the person-centred approach and processes set out in the new SEND Code of Practice 0-25. The opportunity to focus specifically on the transition of young people with autism, as opposed to transition in general, was also viewed as very beneficial as previously that had not happened to the same extent.

Development of staff skills

- Joint training of school and college representatives led to a more cohesive approach to transition planning and practice in the hub areas, as new learning was implemented together.
- Staff skills were enhanced around how to make annual reviews and transition planning centre on an understanding of each young person and of each young person's aspirations for adult life.
- Learning from the core training delivered as part of the project was shared with other colleagues in schools and colleges.
- The relationships developed in the hubs enabled mutual learning across school and college representatives and increased supportive contact between the four colleges and the between each hub's school partners.

⁶ These were 16 of the 27 people who agreed to be followed up one year after the initial three-day training.

- The project focus on autism stimulated a desire for further training on autism such as the Autism Education Trust's post-16 training which was delivered in three of the lead colleges.

Enhanced strategic planning for transition

- Relationships developed through the hubs enabled the college leads to join key strategic planning forums, such as the local Autism Board, and to be involved in the development of the Local Offer.
- The hub relationships also stimulated local hub schools to work more closely together, for example, to enhance the curriculum offer across Sixth Forms.

Improved person-centred planning for transition

- One-page profiles were created by the young people with autism which were found to be very useful by the receiving college staff.
- Hub schools put in to practice person-centred annual review meetings which transformed the experience for the young people and their parents.
- Greater emphasis was placed on providing the Cohort 1 young people with autism and their parents with opportunities to gain information about the range of post-school destinations available, and to have the opportunity to visit and to attend taster sessions in order to support young people's choices.
- Once a choice had been made, there were enhanced opportunities to become familiar with that new environment through visits, link courses, 'in-fill' sessions and the creation of person-specific information packs including photos of key college staff and draft timetables for the new academic year.

Impact on the young people making the transition in 2014 (Cohort 1)

- All 45 young people in Cohort 1 made a positive transition; 30 of them to the hub colleges.
- The young people's views of their one-page profiles depended on the quality of the process by which they had been created, that is, the more a young person was involved in creating his or her profile, the more it was valued.
- All the young people interviewed were very positive about the activities that had supported their ability to make an active choice of post-school destination.
- The young people were also very positive about the activities that had enabled them to feel familiar and comfortable in the new college environment.

Strengthened assessment processes

- The Finished at School programme enhanced the amount and quality of information collected by colleges about the young people with autism enrolling as students.
- This enhanced information enabled the colleges to prepare better, and to understand more about each young person's autism, meaning that assessments included sensory needs and social communication needs, as well as curriculum progression.

New curriculum pathways

- All four colleges undertook curriculum development work with new courses being offered and new bespoke programmes of study created to better match the 'spiky profiles' of individual learners with autism.
- Strong links between the hub schools and colleges enabled enhanced curriculum progression pathways to be created.
- There was a much stronger focus on preparing the young people for adulthood which began in school and intensified in college.
- Planning for the next transition began early on in the lead colleges.

Improved access to college life

- In all four colleges, young people with autism were included in college life – they were supported to access college facilities to the level each learner desired and also to have access to quieter alternatives to noisy, busy college facilities, such as canteens.
- On some college campuses, new facilities were developed specifically for learners with autism, such as the creation of quiet areas and of sensory rooms. Attention was also paid to how best to adapt routes in to classes and to key facilities, such as libraries, to reduce the sensory impact.

Conclusions

It is clear from the evaluation data collected that the Finished at School programme was a success. The training on person-centred planning and reviews was welcomed by the four hubs and was effective in increasing knowledge about person-centred approaches and in inspiring positive changes in practice, including a greater involvement of parents and young people in person-centred planning. The hub-based

work was valued for creating both new and enhanced relationships locally, and as an arena for sharing good practice and ideas. The programme increased understanding of the practical implications of the Children and Families Act 2014 and the new SEND Code of Practice 0-25. The opportunity, created by the programme, to focus on improving transition for young people with autism had a positive impact on day-to-day practice in the schools and colleges and also generalised to improve transition for young people with other special educational needs. Regarding Cohort 1, it was clear that young people who would not otherwise have done so, moved on from school to a general further education college. All 45 Cohort 1 learners moved on to positive post-school destinations. This was a major achievement, underpinned by improved person-centred planning.

For those Cohort 1 learners who moved on to the hub colleges, there was evidence that these colleges had improved assessment processes. College staff gathered more and better information earlier about the young people with autism who planned to move to the college. This enabled staff to plan ahead and to provide appropriately for these learners' needs. There was also evidence of positive developments in the curriculum pathways available for young people with autism, and of a greater focus on preparing for adulthood. Aspects that had previously been perceived as barriers to college for young people with autism were systematically addressed: for example, where possible, autism-friendly adaptations were made to the physical environment to reduce sensory overload and triggers for anxiety.

In short, the Finished at School programme has demonstrated that, with locally coordinated person-centred transition planning, reasonable adjustments, and appropriate support, many more young people with complex autism can access local college life successfully.

Recommendations

Based on the data collected for the evaluation of the Finished at School programme, we make the following recommendations.

Recommendations to Ambitious about Autism and its partners

- Ambitious about Autism and its partners, nasen and the Association of Colleges, should seek to continue the work promoting positive, person-centred, outcome-focused transition planning for young people with autism.
- The work should expand to encompass, not only the transition pathways from school to college or training for work, but also from college or training to a fulfilling adult life.
- Ambitious about Autism should continue to promote its College Inclusion Charter, appropriately updated to take account of the Children and Families Act 2014.
- Ambitious about Autism and its partners should encourage relevant staff in all secondary schools and general further education colleges to access training in person-centred approaches and training in understanding the implications of autism for learners and for educational providers.

Recommendations to Local Authorities (including commissioners) and partners

- Local authorities should support the creation of 'Finished at School'-style partnership hubs to enable a strategic focus on successful transition to further education or training for local young people with autism.
- Local authorities, working with relevant partners including parents and young people, should ensure that the Local Offer includes local post-school provision to support the aspirations of all local young people with autism, across the full autism spectrum, so that young people with autism are not forced to move out of area in order to access appropriate post-school education.

Recommendations to general Further Education colleges

- In relation to young people with autism, the general further education sector should, as part of the duty to, '*use their best endeavours to secure the special educational provision that the young person needs*⁷', learn from the good

⁷ Paragraph 7.3 of the *Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0-25 years* (July 2014)

practice approaches to transition from school to college, as exemplified in the Finished at School programme⁸.

- Through the development of individual EHC plans every further education college should work with its feeder local authorities to support strategic planning for successful post-school transitions for young people with autism. This practice should support the transition for all young people with autism including those who do not have EHC plans.
- Further education colleges should work with Local Authorities to ensure that specific information about courses and facilities for potential and existing learners with autism is part of the Local Offer.
- Each further education college should, as far as possible, enable young people with autism to have opportunities (such as clear information, taster sessions, link courses) to find out about the range of courses offered at college. Colleges should recognise that the young people may need support from parents or school and/or college staff to take up these opportunities. College staff should be aware of, and act upon, the requirement to have a bespoke transition plan in place for each young person with autism wishing to attend a college.
- Further Education colleges should develop outcomes-focused personalised study programmes based on the aspirations in individual's Education, Health and Care plan.
- As far as possible, each college should plan alongside feeder local authorities and schools to ensure that a college representative is invited to attend, and attends, annual reviews from Year 9 onwards for any learner with complex autism who is likely to transition to the college.
- To support the requirements of the Equality Act 2010, and the Children and Families Act 2014, every general further education college should make 'best endeavours'⁹ to include in its Quality and Improvement Plan and Equality and Diversity policies a commitment to staff training on autism awareness and to embedding effective practice supporting learners with autism. All staff in general further education colleges should have access to at least awareness-raising training on autism from a credible provider.

⁸ For details of such approaches, see O'Brien, A. (2015). *Supporting Young People with Autism to Move from School to College. Learning from Ambitious about Autism's Finished at School Programme*. London: Ambitious about Autism.

⁹ Paragraph 7.3 of the *Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0-25 years* (July 2014)

Recommendations to senior leaders in secondary schools

- All secondary schools should adopt as far as possible the good practice in transition planning recommended in the *SEND Code of Practice 0-25 years* and highlighted by the Finished at School programme.
- All secondary schools should ensure that, from Year 9 onwards, young people with autism and their parents are supported to be involved in person-centred planning for transition to further education or training after the end of schooling.
- All secondary schools should allocate time to the special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) or another appropriate staff member to work with the local authority and relevant partners, including local further education colleges, to support strategic and operational planning for successful post-school transitions for young people with autism, including passing on information to colleges about the young people's educational achievements, areas for development and autism-specific support needs.
- All staff in secondary schools should have access to at least awareness-raising training on autism from a credible provider, such as the Autism Education Trust, and time to embed new or enhanced learning into practice.
- All relevant staff in secondary schools should have access to training in person-centred ways of working with young people, including those with autism, and time allocated to embed new or enhanced learning into practice.
- All secondary schools should endeavour to support joint working/training between mainstream and special schools to enable the mutual sharing of teaching expertise and of person-centred approaches to preparing young people, including those with autism, for transition from school.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Ambitious about Autism

Ambitious about Autism (www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk) is the national charity for children and young people with autism. It provides services, raises awareness and understanding, and campaigns for change. Its vision is, 'to make the ordinary possible for children and young people with autism' and its mission is, 'to help them to learn, thrive and achieve'.

1.2 The Finished at School programme

Ambitious about Autism, with its partners, **nasen** and the **Association of Colleges**, was commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) to run the 'Finished at School programme' from April 2013 until March 2015. The programme plan involved four college hubs, each working with three partner secondary schools, supporting around 110 young people with autism to make a successful transition to post-school education.

The **aim of the programme** was to prepare the general further education sector for the new responsibilities enshrined in the Children and Families Act, 2014. The key relevant changes in this Act, as identified by Ambitious about Autism on their website, are:

- Statements of special educational needs (SEN) are replaced with a coordinated assessment process and an Education, Health and Care plan (EHC plan).
- Young people in education or training with an Education, Health and Care plan (or a statement of SEN) have statutory rights to appropriate support up to the age of 25, including the right to an annual review.
- Parents or young people with a statement of SEN or an EHC plan have the right to a Personal Budget for their support.
- Health services and local authorities are required jointly to commission and plan services for children, young people and families with a statement of SEN or an EHC plan (the Local Offer).

The programme also built on Ambitious about Autism's campaign, 'Finished at School', for more and better post-school educational options for young people with

autism. The context of the campaign was that fewer than **one in four** young people with autism continue their education beyond school¹⁰.

The four colleges were selected by Ambitious about Autism through a competitive tendering process. In order to be eligible to apply the colleges had to have established a core partnership consisting of special (S) and mainstream (M) secondary schools (see Figure 1) and a local authority transition lead. All partners were required to sign a statement declaring their willingness to participate in the programme.

Figure 1 The Finished at School programme colleges and schools

- Askham Bryan College, in Yorkshire
 - Applefields School (S)
 - Fulford School (M)
 - Joseph Rowntree School (M)
 - King James School (M)
- Bromley College, in London
 - Glebe School (S)
 - Marjorie McClure School (S)
 - Burgess Autism Trust¹¹
- Ealing, Hammersmith and West London College, in London
 - Pield Heath House School (S)
 - Queensmill School (S)
 - Springhallow School (S)
- Gloucestershire College, in Gloucestershire
 - Alderman Knight School (S)
 - The Dean Academy (M)
 - The Milestone School (S).

Note: All schools, colleges and hubs are referred to in the report by randomly assigned code numbers; for example, College 2.

¹⁰ Ambitious about Autism, 2011. *Finished at School. Where next for young people with autism?* The Pears National Centre for Autism Education, London. Ambitious about Autism, 2012. *Finished at School. Creating inclusive colleges for learners with autism. Showcasing good practice.* The Pears National Centre for Autism Education, London.

¹¹ This third sector organisation effectively replaced a school that withdrew early on in the project (it was not a formal partner but was treated as such by the hub). For ease of expression, and to preserve anonymity, it is usually referred to as a 'school' in the report.

Each college led a hub including its partner schools. Each hub also had a local steering group involving other important partners in the transition process, such as local authority transition officers. The **five project aims for the hubs** were that they would work to:

- Develop staff skills.
- Improve person-centred transition planning.
- Strengthen assessment processes.
- Design improved curriculum pathways.
- Ensure learners with autism are able to access all aspects of college life.

The hub work aimed to support the overall project aim by developing a model of transition support that would enable more young people with autism, including those with complex autism, to continue their education beyond school.

Of the **young people** identified to take part in the project, the expectation was that all would be on the autism spectrum, with the majority of them having a statement of SEN that included a diagnosis of autism. In addition, the autism would be 'complex', either because it was associated with other learning difficulties or was, in itself, deemed complex by relevant professionals¹². Each young person included in the project had to be due to make the transition to post-school education in September 2014 (**Cohort 1**), September 2015 (**Cohort 2**) or September 2016 (**Cohort 3**).

1.3 The evaluation

The evaluation, commissioned by Ambitious about Autism, was focused on the project's progress and impact. Progress was the subject of the **Interim Report**¹³ in March 2014. This Final Report focuses on impact. The evaluation also sought to capture key learning from the project in order to support further developments. The evaluation findings have informed a **separate publication** sharing learning from the project.¹⁴

¹² E-mail from Ambitious about Autism to the college hub leads, 27 October 2013.

¹³ Cullen, M.A., Cullen, S.M., Hastings, R, Lindsay, G. 2014. *Evaluation of the 'Finished at School' Programme for Ambitious about Autism, 2013-2015: Interim Report*. Coventry: University of Warwick.

¹⁴ O'Brien, A. (2015). [*Supporting young people to move from school to college*](#). London: Ambitious about Autism.

The evaluation used combined methods (that is, qualitative and quantitative approaches) to gathering evidence of progress and impact. The data collected covered three phases:

i) Initial perspectives (November 2013 to March 2014)

- Telephone interview with lead trainer from Helen Sanderson Associates.¹⁵
- Telephone interviews with college hub and school leads.
- Questionnaire survey of training participants attending Day 3 of the core training on person-centred transition planning.

ii) Embedding processes (October to December 2014)

- Visits to sample of partner schools.
- Telephone interviews with local authority transition officers.
- Telephone interviews with partner school leads.
- Visits to each of the 4 hub colleges.

iii) Achieved impact (January to February 2015)

- Follow-up survey of training participants.
- Questionnaire survey of parents of all the project young people.

1.3.1 The data collected

The evaluation data on which the **Interim Report** was based were:

- From training participants:
 - Fifty-three questionnaires returned after Day 3 of the training.
- From the college hubs:
 - Four interviews, one with each hub's college lead.
- From the schools:
 - Six (of a possible 13) school lead interviews.

Additional data collected to inform this **Final Report** are:

- From training participants:
 - Sixteen (of 27) questionnaires returned one year after the training.

¹⁵ The training organisation commissioned by Ambitious about Autism to lead delivery of person-centred training to the hubs.

- From the college hubs:
 - Four interviews, one with each hub's college lead.
 - Eight interviews with other key staff in the hub colleges.
 - Observations and field notes from a visit to each hub college (four visits).
 - Interviews with 12 young people (three young women and nine young men).¹⁶
- From the schools:
 - Interviews with 11 (of 13) school leads.¹⁷
 - Interviews with one other staff member and two local authority (LA) transition officers linked to project schools.
 - Interviews with four pupils (one female and three males).
- From parents:
 - Interviews with five parents (four mothers and one father).
 - Postal questionnaire returned by nine (of 112) parents.¹⁸
- From the hub LAs:
 - Interviews with three LA transition officers.¹⁹

All interviews were semi-structured and recorded where permission to do so was granted. (Two of the young people exercised their right to choose not to be recorded.) Most of the interviews with professionals were conducted by telephone and lasted between 40 and 75 minutes. The rest were conducted face-to-face during visits to the schools and colleges. One parent was interviewed by telephone; the others face-to-face.

The structure of the interviews with young people was informed by the '[4 + 1 questions](#)' tool developed by Helen Sanderson Associates²⁰. Consent and assent processes and bespoke information sheets were informed by the principles underpinning the Mental Capacity Act. Young people (and parents) were also

¹⁶ Two other Cohort 1 young men were observed in a lesson but were not interviewed.

¹⁷ The remaining two schools each sent an e-mail to explain the circumstances that prevented participation.

¹⁸ The exceptionally low response was, we think, due to logistical issues in getting the questionnaires to the parents. (For example, the postage stamp, checked as correct in a Post Office in Coventry, was deemed insufficient in at least one area – we know this because one responding parent reported having had to pay to receive the envelope.)

¹⁹ These were in addition to the two interviews with transition officers linked to project schools. The transition officer from the 4th LA was willing to participate but we were repeatedly unable to find a mutually convenient time to do the interview.

²⁰ <http://www.helensandersonassociates.co.uk/person-centred-practice/person-centred-thinking-tools/4-plus-1-questions/>

provided in advance with a one-page profile about the researcher. The design and structure of this was informed by examples of young people's [one-page profiles](#) published by Helen Sanderson Associates²¹. The idea to create one was based on the example of some Hub 3 college staff creating one-page profiles. All the young people were interviewed face-to-face. The young people chose whether to be interviewed one-to-one, in a pair or in a small group. They also chose whether or not to have a trusted member of staff present with them during the interview.

Some interviews of each type were transcribed in full; for others, detailed notes were taken during the interviews, supplemented by listening again to the recordings. All the interviews were analysed thematically by collating answers to each question by interviewee type and then grouping together any similar views, as well as paying attention to unique views.

1.4 The structure of the report

The rest of this report is structured around the impact of the project in relation to the five key aims of the work of the hubs. Chapter 2 describes the impact of the project on the development of staff skills. Chapter 3, the longest in the report, focuses on improvements arising from the project in person-centred planning for transition. In Chapter 4, the impact this had on the project young people is reported. In Chapter 5, we present the findings about the impact of the project on assessment processes. In Chapter 6, we report on the developments in the curriculum offer made because of the Finished at School programme. Chapter 7 describes the changes that were made in the college environments, because of the project, to increase the access learners with autism had to all aspects of college life. We give our Conclusions in Chapter 8, followed by our recommendations in Chapter 9.

1.4.1 Presentation of the data

In presenting numerical data, because the number of questionnaire respondents is below 100, responses are given as numbers as well as percentages. All percentages have been rounded to the nearest integer and so may not sum to exactly 100%. To preserve confidentiality, all interviewees have been given a unique random code, as have the four hubs, four colleges and each school. These were used in the analysis process and are used where possible in the text but identification even with a random

²¹ <http://www.helensandersonassociates.co.uk/person-centred-practice/one-page-profiles/>

code is avoided where the content of a quotation or example would identify the college or school.

2 DEVELOPMENT OF STAFF SKILLS

This chapter reports on the impact of the project on the development of staff skills around supporting young people with autism to move from school to college and to thrive within a general further education college environment. The focus is first on the 'Person-centred approaches to transition' training delivered to each hub as part of the project. Then the focus shifts to other ways in which staff skills were developed as a result of the project.

2.1 The 'Person-centred approaches to transition' training

2.1.1 The Helen Sanderson Associates training

As part of the Finished at School Programme, Ambitious about Autism commissioned Helen Sanderson Associates²², along with a consultant from the National Development Team for Inclusion, to deliver four days of training to each of the four college-led hubs. The first three days of training focused on 'Person-centred approaches to transition for young people with autism'. Specifically, the days covered:

- The use of a person-centred approach to working with young people.
- A person-centred approach to planning ahead for young people.
- The development of one-page profiles of each young person with autism.
- The use of person-centred review meetings.

This was preceded by a training needs analysis day designed to help each hub decide the focus of their fourth day of training and to alert Helen Sanderson Associates of any hub-specific adaptations required for the three day training package on person-centred approaches. The fourth 'day' of training was in fact split in to two separate opportunities: a fourth day of training facilitated by Helen Sanderson Associates consolidating the work covered in the first three days training and helping participants action plan for taking this forward in practice; and a day with a consultant, Peter Vickers, to complement the person-centred training.

Views about the three days of core training were reported in the Interim Report. Here we add perspectives from one year later, including views about the fourth day of training. We first report findings from questionnaires to the training participants and

²² <http://www.helensandersonassociates.co.uk>

then views expressed during the interviews with school, college and local authority transitions officers in Year 2.

2.1.1.1 Views of the training from the questionnaires

Questionnaires about the training were completed at the end of Day 3 of the core training. Responses were received from all four hubs, **53** in total (Tables 1a and 2a), equating to all delegates who attended Day 3. Of these 53, **27** provided contact details to enable us to send them a follow-up questionnaire one year later. Of these 27, **16** completed the follow-up questionnaire (Tables 1b and 2b)²³.

Table 1a Reflections on the training – immediately afterwards (N/%)

Scale	Strongly Disagree 1		Disagree 2		Neutral 3		Agree 4		Strongly Agree 5	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Reflecting on this course ... :										
a) ... I find it hard to see how I can use what we've learned.	29	55	13	25	4	8	3	6	3	6
b)... Person-centred reviews will fit well with our school/college/local processes.	2	4	2	4	9	18	22	44	15	30
c) ... I've learned new practical 'tools' I will use in my work/role.	3	6	3	6	5	9	15	28	27	51
d) ... I still do not understand the value of one-page profiles.	41	77	6	11	2	4	3	6	1	2
e)... I am confident I know how to write person-centred outcomes.	1	2	6	11	17	32	22	42	7	13
f) ... I valued having project partnership colleagues on the training.	4	8	1	2	4	8	11	21	33	62

N varies from 50 to 53.

Tables 1a shows that the training was well received at the time, with a majority (55% to 88%) reporting positive views of its practical value.

²³ Of the 11 non-responses, three were returned as 'e-mail not delivered' and one person had left.

Table 1b Reflections on the training – one year later (N/%)

Scale	Strongly Disagree 1		Disagree 2		Neutral 3		Agree 4		Strongly Agree 5	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Reflecting on this course ... :										
a) ... I have not used anything we covered during the training.	6	40	7	47	0	0	2	13	0	0
b) ... person-centred reviews have fitted well with our school/college/local processes.	0	0	3	20	0	0	12	80	0	0
c) ... I've used new practical 'tools' learned on the course.	0	0	2	13	0	0	11	73	2	13
d)... I still do not understand the value of one-page profiles.	9	60	5	33	0	0	1	6	0	0
e) ... I am confident I know how to write person-centred outcomes.	0	0	5	31	0	0	10	63	1	6
f) ... I value having had project partnership colleagues on the training.	0	0	0	0	0	0	9	56	7	44

N = 16

For almost all of those who completed the follow-up questionnaire, the training had a positive impact on practice (Table 1b). For example, 13 of 16 said they had used aspects of the training, including new 'tools' learned about on the course. All respondents reported that they valued having partnership colleagues on the training.

Tables 2a and 2b show that the positive views of the training at the end of Day 3, in terms of its worth, increased knowledge and improved understanding, were maintained one year later.

Table 2a Value of the training – responses immediately after (N/%)

Scale	Strongly Disagree 1		Disagree 2		Neutral 3		Agree 4		Strongly Agree 5	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Attending this training ... :										
a) ... was worthwhile.	0	0	1	2	3	6	11	21	38	72
b)]... increased my knowledge of person-centred approaches.	0	0	1	2	1	2	14	26	37	70
c) ... improved my understanding of the perspectives of others involved in supporting transition of young people with autism.	0	0	1	2	7	13	21	40	24	45

N = 53

Table 2b Value of the training – responses one year later (N/%)

Scale	Strongly Disagree 1		Disagree 2		Neutral 3		Agree 4		Strongly Agree 5	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Attending this training ... :										
a) ... was worthwhile.	0	0	1	6	0	0	7	43	8	50
b) ... increased my knowledge of person-centred approaches.	0	0	1	6	0	0	7	44	8	50
c) ... improved my understanding of the perspectives of others involved in supporting transition of young people with autism.	0	0	2	13	0	0	8	50	6	38

N = 16

All but one²⁴ of the 16 people who completed the follow-up questionnaire one year later responded to the open question asking them to write about **at least one positive change made, because of the training, to better support young people**

²⁴ The 16th person wrote, 'I no longer work in this area so am unable to comment.'

with autism. The changes described illustrated the positive impact of staff skill development but also related to three more of the five main aims of the hubs:

- Improved person-centred transition planning (see Chapter 3).
- Improved design of curriculum pathways (see Chapter 6).
- Improved access to college life (see Chapter 7).

The changes described are therefore reported in the relevant later chapters.

All but one of the 16 people who completed the follow-up questionnaire one year later also responded to the open question asking them to write about what it was from the training that had '**proved to be of lasting value/use** to them'. Figure 2 gives illustrative comments, reflecting the themes mentioned by college and school participants. Two comments were 'atypical' but illustrated well **the wider impact of staff skill development**. The first is from a member of school staff; the second from a member of college staff:

'[Because of the training], being able to be part of the LA's pilot project re the development of the EHC [Education, Health and Care] proforma. Being able to share my thoughts and opinions with the LA and the senior leadership team in my school. Working with my local sector college. Piloting PowerPoint [presentations by young people in their review meetings] and getting positive feedback from all professionals and families invited to EHC transfer meetings.'

(A school delegate who attended the training)

'The whole training package was very worthwhile. Being part of the project has seen us being invited to join local partnership boards and to join the Secondary Schools' SENCO Forum so our partnership working has also increased as a direct result.'

(A college delegate who attended the training)

Figure 2 Illustrative comments about the lasting value of the training

Illustrative college views

‘Ensuring that students [can make] **informed decisions** and are able to **make choices** about both their present programme and their future. I have seen the value of asking students their opinions, no matter what the level of communication or cognitive ability. [The training] has made me reflect on my own work and made it even more conscious to me that there is a need to provide students with the opportunity to make choices and comment on their activities in college [in order] to make their programme **person-centred** and relevant to their hopes and dreams for now and the future. This, in turn, **helps students to take more responsibility and to be a part of the decision-making process**, rather than being passive.’

‘**A new way of looking at what the young person wants** as opposed to everything being needs-led. A very positive experience.’

‘The **one-page profile**, the **approach to parents and carers**, and the **input of learners** in their reviews.

Illustrative school views

‘I found **all the training extremely useful**. The **one-page profiles** are proving to be invaluable. They will be used for all SEN students across our mainstream school. The training also made me realise how impersonal and daunting our old review meetings were, both for students and parents. **The changes we made will have a lasting impact**.’

‘Seeing those **person-centred wishes** beginning to realise themselves. Used well, they can make **a real difference to individuals**.’

‘**Person-centred reviews** and how they can **contribute to the EHC plans**.’

Source: Follow-up questionnaire, October 2014.

In open comments on the post-training questionnaire, one college staff member, in commenting on the lasting value of the training, also raised **two important issues**: that the 'best practice' demonstrated on the training was not necessarily current practice and that not all young people with autism would want to be involved in their review meeting:

'Having attended some EHCP [Education, Health and Care plan] transfer reviews, I can see how these are not person-centred at the moment, partly due to the rushed timeframe for them being completed. [...] I also recognise that, for some young people, they just do not want to be involved.'

(A college staff member)

These issues are returned to later in the report.

2.1.1.2 Views expressed in Year 2 interviews

Across the interviews with school, college and local authority interviewees, three themes emerged as interviewees reflected back on the training.

One theme was the **benefits** of the training having been delivered **jointly** to school, college and other delegates. For example, one local authority transitions officer valued the impact on parents and young people of school staff going 'off the site' to train alongside college staff:

'I went along to one training session all about person centred planning. That was a good thing because, if schools get off the site and go to college and meet people from the college, they see actually that they're not so frightened of the big, bad world outside of school. Again that filters down to the parents and to the children. So that's been a good thing, all the joint training that's been going on. [...] It was good to see all the school and college staff and people all sitting together and talking. You just can't do enough of that really, just getting people together and talking about common issues.'

(LA transitions officer 2)

Two college leads (Hubs 3 & 4) also spoke of the benefits of school and college staff training together and **implementing the new learning together**. 'It gave us a joined-up approach', as one put it (Hub 4). These college leads valued the resulting One-page profiles made by the project's Cohort 1 students who made the transition to

their colleges. The profiles were valued as having helped the colleges learn about how best to support the young people to meet their aspirations for adult life.

A second theme was how valuable it was **to learn, through the training, more about the reforms** encapsulated in the Children and Families Act 2014 and the new *SEND Code of Practice: 0-25 years*. It was reported as having, ‘helped people to understand’ the reforms and the new Code of Practice. It also led to school and college project leads **taking on a strategic role** within their institution in terms of informing colleagues about the reforms and shaping thinking about how the new Code of Practice could be put in to practice. For example, as a result of attending the three core days of training, the College 1 lead was appointed by the college to act as the college’s representative at local authority meetings about the SEND reforms and the local implementation of the new Education, Health and Care plans. She was then required to share this learning with senior managers and with staff. As a result of this, the local authority offered the college a link person to support them through the process of transferring a learner from a Learning Difficulties Assessment to an Education, Health and Care plan. As another example: because of the training, College 4 linked up with its local SEND Pathfinder²⁵ practitioners and gained their support in implementing the reforms. In that college’s ‘home’ LA, too, because of the training, the authority paid for all of its transitions officers to receive one day’s training on person-centred planning to support them in leading local Transfer Reviews in a person-centred way.

The third theme was about **the fourth day of training**. The focus of this day varied from hub to hub, as did views of its usefulness. The most positive comments came from Hub 3 where the focus had been on **non-accredited activities within study programmes**²⁶. (see Chapter 6 on Curriculum Pathways). In Hub 2, where the fourth day focused on ‘a recap in the context of the Local Offer’, one interviewee reported that this was not as useful as the core training on person-centred reviews.

2.1.2 Sharing learning from the training

From interviews with the project’s school and college leads, it became clear that the external training received had prompted at least some school leads and all college

²⁵ From October 2011 to March 2013, 31 local authorities acted as ‘Pathfinder’ areas for the proposed SEND reforms.

²⁶ Guidance on study programmes was published in March 2015 on the GOV.UK website.

leads to **share the main learning from the training to other school and college staff.**

School examples included:

- A school lead who modelled person-centred reviews to other staff who went on to use the approach in their classes (School 12/ Hub 4).
- Staff who attended the training reported as feeling, 'more confident about transition planning and holding person-centred reviews. This approach is being shared within the school.' (School 8/Hub 1).
- Staff using person-centred conversations 'all the time', leading to the creation of Personal Profiles and 'feeling more comfortable' about facilitating person-centred reviews. (School 9/Hub 2).
- Staff using the learning from the training to support the transition of other young people in the school and cascading the learning from the training to enable two teaching assistants to work with young people on creating one-page profiles. (School 7/Hub 2).

College examples of sharing key learning from the training with colleagues included:

- The Person-centred Planning Toolkit²⁷ circulated to tutors and the adoption by the college of person-centred reviews, based on the training received through the Finished at School project (College 2).
- Delivery of a 45 minute cascade to departmental tutors on one-page profiles, highlighting also the tools and supportive resources available on the Helen Sanderson Associates website (College 4).

This sharing of the learning did not preclude or replace the need for colleagues to access appropriate training in their own right. (see section 2.2).

A minority of comments raised **issues related to the training.** One school lead raised an important issue about the constraint the local context could have on implementation of the learning from the training. Because, in this person's view, the local authority did not take on board a person-centred approach for the Transfer Reviews being conducted locally, the newly learned and trialled person-centred

²⁷ 'Person-centred thinking tools' available from the Helen Sanderson Associates website: <http://www.helensandersonassociates.co.uk/person-centred-practice/person-centred-thinking-tools/>

'Person-centred Planning Toolkit' available from the Autism Education trust website: <http://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/resources/person-centred-planning-toolkits.aspx>

approach to reviews, 'had to be abandoned' (School 5/Hub 1). Another person was critical of the training as having not been sufficiently adapted from generic person-centred approaches to *autism-specific* person-centred approaches (School 7/Hub 2). These were minority views: the majority were very positive about the usefulness of the training.

2.1.3 Changed practice because of the training

There were examples from all four hubs of the training having led to **person-centred approaches being integrated in to both school and college practice**. For example, an LA transitions officer in Hub 2 reported that, because of the training, College 2 had integrated person-centred planning into its core curriculum (further details in Chapters 5 and 6). The College 1 lead reported that she was working with senior managers to plan how to make person-centred reviews happen across the college. At time of interview in early 2015, the plan was for course managers to use one-to-one sessions with the learners to develop this approach.

Schools, too, reported adopting person-centred approaches. In some cases, this was corroborated by interviewees from the same hub but external to the school. This was the case, for example, for School 11 (a special school) which was inspired by the training **to embed the work required to prepare for a person-centred review in to the core curriculum**, including but not limited to IT and employability lessons. This was corroborated by the local college lead who noted that person-centred approaches to annual reviews 'have to be something that is driven throughout the school year'.

2.2 Other staff skill development arising because of the project

The training in person-centred approaches to transition planning delivered as part of the Finished at School project was not the only vehicle through which staff skills were developed during the project. Some staff also accessed other relevant training and skills development.

2.2.1 AET's 'Making Sense of Autism' post-16 training programme

In **all four hub colleges, some staff took part in the Autism Education Trust's awareness training about autism** designed for those working in post-16 educational environments, 'Making Sense of Autism'²⁸.

In College 1, initially, **the project lead and all the Foundation Learning tutors** did this training. The college lead explained that some staff needed further 'educating' about how to adjust their ways of working to include learners with autism and to understand the areas of difference, such as in social communication. As she said, the tutors needed to be aware, for example, that, 'This young person is not being awkward; he's not being rude; he's just very literal' (College lead 1). In College 1, **further delivery of the training was planned**, with the selection of staff due to attend the AET training designed to support curriculum pathways and progression from Entry level to Level 1 and from Level 1 to Level 2. The plan was that staff from different subject departments would attend the training in turn. This college lead was very aware that awareness training around autism was a continual need, due to staff turn-over.

In College 3, the initial group who attended the AET awareness training about autism were **all the learning support assistants (LSAs)**. According to the college lead, all 114 LSAs were brought in to one college campus to attend one of several repeats of the awareness training over the space of one day. The plan was for further training to take place. For example, some of the **core transitions team** were to attend the two-day Tier 2 AET training for practitioners and there was a commitment from **senior managers** to attend the one-day Tier 3 training for managers.

The need to raise awareness of how to deal with individual needs was taken on board in College 4 where the AET awareness training was being rolled out to **all teaching staff and all support staff**. The aim was that all operational staff **and middle managers** would be trained. One College 4 tutor interviewed had delivered an AET awareness session to 70 staff from across Student Services (counsellors, careers advisers, and those working in student finance). She believed that it was 'vital' that all staff, especially course tutors, understood that **anxiety** is often a part of autism and therefore, should be able to use strategies to help reduce such anxiety. In her training session, she emphasised that staff should focus on the support needed

²⁸ For further details of the training, see the Autism Education Trust webpage: <http://www.aettraininghubs.org.uk/post-16/>

by each learner with autism in the four areas of difference (social interaction and emotional expression; understanding and use of communication and language; information processing; sensory processing). She also noted that many learners with complex needs did not necessarily have a formal diagnosis of 'autism' yet had support needs in these four areas. In the training, she therefore reminded staff that, 'You're working [to support] *needs*, not *labels*'.

2.2.2 Other training and skills development

Other formal training, mentioned by interviewees as having been prompted by the Finished at School project to include more learners with autism in mainstream FE colleges, included **training on understanding and responding to challenging behaviour**. In Hub 2, for example, the local authority 'brokered' training for college staff on 'Behaviour that challenges' because staff had expressed anxiety about working with students with complex autism. This was supported by access to professional expertise of a speech and language therapist, an educational psychologist and an occupational therapist. The latter also provided 'clinics' to support staff to understand, and work with, the **sensory processing needs** of learners with autism.

Formal training was not the only way skills development took place. The relationships developed in the four Finished at School hubs supported **peer learning**. Examples included:

- The 'useful' advice obtained from a college lead attending reviews in the school (School 8/Hub 1).
- The improved understanding of needs of learners with autism generated by college lead working together with school staff in the hub (Schools 7 & 9/Hub 2):

'They now understand more about the 'spiky profile' of knowledge and skills.'

(School 9)

'It's made the college [College 2] more aware that 'autism' is just a label and that there is a need to focus on social communication difficulties and how best to work with them. [...] Our other local college has the attitude that if the label, autism, is not on the statement, then the young person hasn't got these needs.'

(School 7)

Figure 3 gives an extended example from Hub 3.

Figure 3 Extended example of peer learning within a hub

A mainstream school lead reporting learning from her special school equivalent. She also noted that this peer learning had happened for all the schools in the hub:

‘It’s good to have that contact there and to be able to share information. They’ve been and visited here and we’ve visited all their schools. We’ve picked up ideas and shared resources. It’s been really good, actually; really useful. [...] It’s just lovely to have an opportunity to pick up ideas from other people. [...] Other people have completely different ways of doing things and it’s nice to re-evaluate sometimes. I picked up some lovely stuff for transition plans for students from [the special school lead], with visuals, with pictures. Much more simple than the one we currently use – more like a transition passport kind of thing. I picked up that idea from her and I’m going to incorporate that into ours.’

Source: interview with School 1 lead, November 2014

College 1 was unique among the hubs in developing **Autism Champions** from among the staff and learners at each curriculum level (Entry Level, level 1, Level 2). This proved to be an effective way of peer-to-peer awareness raising.²⁹

2.3 Chapter summary

This chapter has focused on staff skill development because of the Finished at School programme. Each of the four hubs received three days of core training on person-centred approaches to transition planning, plus a fourth ‘day’ of further training opportunities tailored to each hub. Feedback at the end of the third day of core training was positive, with 98% agreeing or strongly agreeing it was worthwhile, 96% agreeing or strongly agreeing that it had increased their knowledge of person-centred approaches and a majority (55% to 88%) reporting positive views of its practical value. One year later, views remained positive. All 16 respondents reported valuing having had project partnership colleagues on the training with them, a

²⁹ Further details given in O’Brien (2015), op. cit., p 32 and in its related online resource bank.

majority (13 of 16) had used aspects of the training in their practice, and all but one viewed it as having been worthwhile and as having increased their knowledge of person-centred approaches. These 15 people wrote about at least one positive change they had made because of the training to better support young people with autism and about its lasting value to them.

During interviews with school, college and local authority interviewees, three themes emerged as people reflected back on the training. These were: the benefits of the training having been delivered to a mixed audience of school, college and other delegates together; the value of learning more, through the training, about the SEN and disability reforms encapsulated in the Children and Families Act 2014 and the 2014 Code of Practice; and mixed views reported of the fourth day of training. From these interviews, it was also clear that at least some staff who attended the training had shared key learning from it with colleagues; and that the training had prompted person-centred changes to be embedded in to routine practice.

Stimulated by the Finished at School programme, some staff also accessed other relevant training and skills development. For example, each hub made use of either the Autism Education Trust's post-16 training programme, 'Making Sense of Autism' or of other awareness-raising training about autism. As well as formal training, staff skills were also developed through peer-to-peer learning.

3 IMPROVED PERSON-CENTRED TRANSITION PLANNING

This chapter reports first the strategic and then the operational improvements to person-centred transition planning made because of the work of the Finished at School programme hubs. ‘Strategic’ is defined as affecting system-level change whereas ‘operational’ focuses on changes arising from within an institution.

3.1 Improvements made at strategic partnership (hub) level

The strategic level improvements related to:

- Improved communication arising from the creation of the hub network itself.
- Bringing a focus on autism to existing strategic forums and boards through new or strengthened connections.
- Increased confidence about understanding and implementing the new *SEND Code of Practice: 0-25 years*.
- Recognising the importance of local leadership being invested in more than one person to ensure continuity of the work should the lead be ill or move on to another post.
- Increased understanding of the partners that needed to be involved to make the system work well locally.
- Increased awareness of local gaps in post-school provision for particular subsets of local young people with autism.
- Increased awareness of the potential of the local general further education college to meet the needs of more learners with complex autism, alongside a recognition that some young people with complex autism will continue to require specialist further education provision.

These points are addressed in turn.

3.1.1 The value of a local network (hub) focused on transition of young people with autism

The network of relationships created by the hubs (which expanded during the programme) was viewed as benefiting the strategic, system-level planning for transition of young people with autism. In all four hubs, many interviewees spoke about this, saying, for example: ‘You need to be networking all the time to make this [transition of young people with autism] a success’ (School 13/Hub 2) or ‘It requires

everybody to pull together for transition to work well for the students' (College 1 course manager).

In all four hubs, interviewees spoke about the benefits of **improved communication** arising from the hub. Examples of this from each hub are given to illustrate this important point as, without good communication between and among the relevant partners, good transitions for young people with autism are unlikely to happen.

In **Hub 1**, a school lead spoke of how the relationship his school had built up with the hub college and with the Connexions adviser through the Finished at School hub would 'ease the transition process' (School 5/Hub 1). In this hub, the college lead had been responsive to constraints on school staff leaving school premises and had instead visited the schools in person. (As the lead explained, a specialist autism resource in a mainstream school could have 15 to 20 pupils and only two teachers, making it impossible for one of them to come out of school during school hours.) The direct relationship with schools was important as it enabled the college to find out, well in advance, the names of prospective students. This, in turn, enabled the college to 'start doing transition work a lot earlier' (Hub 1 lead). One course manager at College 1 valued the increased willingness of schools to work with the college through the transition period as a return to the more direct relationship colleges had had with schools prior to the introduction of the Connexions Service. In his view, that had, 'cut us out' so that, 'the majority of contact with schools and students is done through Connexions'. Through the Finished at School hub, the direct link had been recreated, whilst a good relationship with the Connexions advisers had been maintained. In addition, the hub had led to the college lead joining both the local SENCO Forum, thus creating a strategic level link to all local secondary schools, and the authority's Autism Strategy Group, creating a strategic level link to other key partners such as Health and Social Care.

In **Hub 2**, the college lead valued the hub so much that an early decision was made to continue it beyond the life of the Finished at School programme. It was seen as having created a forum to discuss each transitioning student with autism in a joined-up way that 'galvanised' the process of working together and keeping each other informed so that 'things were followed up and therefore happened for the students'. In addition, the college lead attended the 'home' LA's strategic planning Post-16 SEND Group which included all the local special schools and other relevant partners. The Finished at School programme had particularly flagged up at strategic level the

need to plan for transition of pupils from **Year 11 as well as for older learners** transitioning at age 18 or 19. (This point was also made by other interviewees, such as a College 1 course manager who argued strongly that students needed supported transitions when moving from an age 11-16 school to a Sixth Form in another school, just as much as when moving on from school to college.) Overall, the result of the hub had been that, 'Transition is now in the forefront of our thinking' (College 2 lead).

The School 11 lead in **Hub 3** valued the 'much better communication' between the hub schools, the college and the local authority, with a spin-off being **much improved links between the special and mainstream schools** in the hub. The School 1 lead in the same hub corroborated this, as did the local transition officer who described the schools and college as, 'now working as a group' to improve local transitions. The college lead reported that having **included a local parent**, who was both a governor of a local special school and the mother of a learner with autism, had been an 'invaluable' addition to the hub membership. Hub 3 also included the local autism support team coordinator, a local authority transitions officer, as well as representatives from the three schools. By virtue of being the hub lead, the college lead was made a member of the local Adult Autism Strategy Partnership, which gave the hub access to 'lots of representatives from Health and Care, as well as Education'. As a strategic planning group, they had taken on board the learning from the Finished at School hub that, 'Good transition starts much earlier than doing a link experience at Year 11'. It was realised that **time** had to be allocated to building relationships with the schools, the parents and the young people.

In **Hub 4**, the School 12 lead reported how, even although the three hub schools all had good links with each other historically, they had never before, 'sat down together and thought about the commonalities of what goes well and what was challenging about transition'. The local transition officer spoke about how the hub had, 'built and strengthened the relationships between the college and schools so that schools could describe to parents what the college could offer.' From her point of view as a local commissioner, this was helpful as, 'the needs of parents are very important'. The more parents could be reliably informed about the local college through the school staff they trusted, the more they would be willing to consider the local college as a potential next step for their son or daughter. The college lead noted how discussions in the hub had led to the concept of a local 'catchment area' for the college, that is, schools where geographic proximity to the college led staff and students to consider the college as a potential next step. Local colleges were viewed

as having the added benefit of making travel to college 'quite accessible' for learners with autism. The 'catchment area' idea was an extension of the hub: that is, a vision of a group of local schools' staff getting to know each other, and working well together to support positive transitions. Through the hub lead, the Finished at School hub fed in to pre-existing strategic planning forums - local LAs' Post-16 SEND Transition Boards - where forward planning took place about meeting the support and curriculum needs of the local community of young people with SEND, including autism.

3.1.2 Implementing the new *SEND Code of Practice: 0-25 years*

As well as improving communication, the network of hub relationships was also viewed as **promoting confidence about understanding and implementing the new *SEND Code of Practice***. In this regard, the degree to which the hub linked with the local authority's SEND team was crucial. For example, in Hub 2, the LA was a SEND Pathfinder. The hub included an LA officer well-versed in the SEND reform implementation locally. Therefore, the hub learning about person-centred transition planning and the development of person-centred reviews and of one-page profiles was integrated into the LA implementation of the new Education, Health and Care plans. This contrasted with Hub 3 where, despite improved links with the LA, the implementation of transfer reviews³⁰ for the new EHC plans was not being conducted in a person-centred manner. ('The meaningful consultation with parents and young people in the person-centred review has been lost in the transfer review process', School 11/Hub 3, corroborated by School 6/Hub 3) The School 6 lead argued that the hub may have had insufficient influence on the LA in this regard because, in his view and with hindsight, the hub had focused the programme too much at the operational level of one-page profiles and person-centred reviews for the Cohort 1 individual young people and did not do enough strategic-level work with the local authority or even at institutional level:

'The one-page profiles [...] are useful but, before that, there are institutional issues, and issues about going between institutions, that need to be tackled first.

(School 6/Hub 3)

³⁰ Advice from the Department for Education states that transfer reviews are to be conducted in a person-centred way. DfE, 2015. *Transition to the new 0-25 special educational needs and disability system*, p27.
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/414952/SEND_Reforms_transitional_advice_March15.pdf

In Hub 1, too, the local implementation of transfer reviews did not match the person-centred approaches underpinning the national SEND reforms and developed locally through the hub work. A school lead (School 5) reported that the transfer review paperwork implemented locally was not person-centred – but that the intention was to return to the person-centred approach piloted through the Finished at School hub for all subsequent annual reviews of the EHC plans.

3.1.3 Local leadership

Issues around gaps in local hub leadership, due to illness in one case and staff turnover in another case, affected the work of two of the FAS programme hubs specifically. This also highlighted, more generally, the importance of having strong local leadership of strategic planning for transition of young people with autism invested in more than one person. Without this, the work was at risk of losing focus, leading to disengagement of partners:

‘The hub lead left and there was a hiatus which meant that there was not as much joint hub work as I’d have liked.’

(School 3/Hub 4)

‘The hub lead left and no-one seemed to pick it up so I have had no further involvement with the project because of that.’

(School 2/Hub 4)

3.1.4 Involving the right range of people

The Finished at School programme hubs were originally set up as one college in partnership with three local secondary schools. In addition, each hub had to include an LA transition lead. It may have **enhanced the programme further** if all the hubs had been required to include from the start a LA commissioner responsible for post-school provision and a LA representative involved in the implementation of the SEND reforms. Over time, at least three of the hubs opened up to include people with such roles as hub members, and all made strong links with people in these roles, even if they did not become hub members *per se*.

3.1.5 Local intelligence about gaps in provision

The Finished at School programme hubs acted as sources of **local intelligence about gaps in provision for young people with autism**. For example, gaps highlighted included:

- In Hub 1

- Provision to fill ‘the long gap between the end of school and the start of college’; more tasters, visits or simply information to tide parents and young people over that period were suggested³¹. (School 10).
- In Hub 2
 - Provision for the ‘more able children in mainstream schools’ affected by ‘high anxiety’ who ended up ‘missing out on education’ (School 13).
 - Training for all college staff to enable them to understand autism and associated ‘behaviour that challenges’ (LA transition officer 1).
- in Hub 3
 - Local provision suitable for ‘very capable young people who have anxiety as their biggest barrier’ (Local transitions officer 2).
 - College-level education for learners with autism who have had a long history of being home-educated because of high anxiety and previous negative experiences (Local transitions officer 2)³².
 - Provision for ‘high-functioning’ learners with autism ‘capable of A-levels’ but with a ‘spiky profile’ meaning they required Entry Level Life Skills, such as learning how to use public transport. Feedback was that the hub college was ‘seeking to address this’ (Local transition officer 3).
 - Supported transition for young people with autism moving on from mainstream schools without the ‘protection’ of a statement of SEN: ‘these are the young people that struggle in college’ (Local transition officer 4).
 - Support for parents to plan, ‘cover for the long summer’, the two-week long half-term holidays and the 4-day, rather than 5-day week at college (viewed as a particular concern for parents) (School 11).

(No gaps were highlighted by interviewees from Hub 4.)

It was also recognised that, even with a supported transition, some of these gaps could only be filled by provision other than the local FE college - even one that was responsive and sought to be as autism-friendly as possible. The following extended quotation illustrates this (Figure 4).

³¹ These were put in place in, for example, College 3 and College 4.

³² This interviewee reported efforts by the hub college lead to arrange for home tuition by a college tutor for such young people but this was not agreed to by the college management.

In Hub 2, the **hub schools began to work together with the intention of filling some gaps in the Local Offer** in terms of Sixth Form curriculum options. The plan was to offer in-fill places to each other's students so that, for example, some learners from the local special school could access A-level options at the local mainstream secondary which, in turn, could send some of its pupils to access more practical options at the special school.

Figure 4 General further education college not right for every learner

Case study of one young man with autism and high anxiety

‘There’s a limit to what you can do when you’ve got a big mainstream college with a lot of students in it. Some of my students aren’t going to be able to transition to the college unless they knock the building down, make it much smaller and take all the students away. [...] I’ve just been to a meeting at the [hub] college about a young man who had had lots and lots of link days to [the hub] college. We’d arranged a special meeting with the counselling team because we were really worried about his transition. Unfortunately it hasn’t worked out. He’s only done 4 or 5 weeks and he’s had to leave. That’s why I’m so painfully aware [the rationale behind the project] has got its limitations.

No matter what the college did, the environment was causing him massive anxiety. [...] One of the quite common aspects of a person with autism is the anxiety and that’s really, really hard to manage. To make education cost-effective obviously the local authority want most people to all come together to be educated in a college setting. For a lot of my leavers that’s just too hard. They just find that really hard indeed. That’s what drives them in the direction of the specialist, therapeutic colleges which have got the space and the very tiny numbers.

But for this young man, he’s really quite high-functioning; he’s capable of a Level 2 course definitely, easily, but his anxiety is the biggest barrier to him being able to learn anything. I think that’s a gap, probably not just in this county but in a lot of counties, the very capable young people who have the anxiety as the biggest barrier. It’s really difficult to know where to place them. For him, I’m going to have to try and put something a bit bespoke together. He may even be better suited to an adult environment. I may try and find him a work placement which isn’t ideal at 16 to think, that’s it, my full-time education is over, but that might be the only scenario he can cope with. Being surrounded with other teenagers; not coping with adolescence - it’s your worst nightmare if you’re autistic and you’re mis-reading the social cues all the time.

Source: interview with local transition officer, mid-October 2014

3.2 Improvements made at operational level in schools and colleges

The relationships between, and among, the schools and college staff and other partners, plus the four days of training on person-centred approaches, had **a positive impact on day-to-day practices** related to transition planning for young people with autism in 10 of the 12 schools and in all four colleges. (The other two schools effectively withdrew from the project. In one case, this was due to long-term illness of the school lead and, in the other, to losing touch with the project when the college lead moved on to another post and was not immediately replaced.³³)

These operational level improvements related to:

- Spreading the good practice of beginning transition planning two years in advance.
- Spreading the good practice of regular visits from and to the local college.
- Improved information about college options reaching schools and parents.
- Greater involvement of parents in the process.
- Enhanced or new implementation of one-page profiles.
- Enhanced or new implementation of person-centred reviews.
- Enhanced or new emphasis on preparing for adulthood.
- Colleges feeding back to schools about how the transition to college had gone for their former pupils.
- Enhanced or new emphasis on preparing young people with autism for transitions within, and out of, college.

These improvements are briefly discussed in turn.

3.2.1 Beginning transition planning at least two years in advance

All three versions of the Code of Practice for SEN/D (1996, 2001 and 2014) have set out an expectation that planning for transition from school to the next destination would begin in Year 9, when the annual review would have a particular focus on the topic. In practice, this happened more in some local authorities and schools than in others. The schools involved in the Finished at School programme varied in the degree to which this early planning had been practiced prior to the project³⁴. In some, this was already well-established prior to the project. For example, in one special school (School 9/Hub 2), the transitions coordinator had a post-graduate qualification

³³ Communicated to the researcher by e-mail.

³⁴ See previous Interim Report, op. cit.

in careers counselling and, after the demise of the local Connexions service in 2011, took on conducting the 'Moving On' interviews with Year 9 pupils. These had a person-centred focus on the likes, dislikes, strengths and weaknesses of each young person and on their hopes and aspirations for adult life. Very much like the process of creating one-page profiles, this style of 'Moving On' interview generated information about the young person that could be easily missed otherwise. The information informed subsequent individual education plans (IEPs) for each learner and was regularly updated. As this interviewee emphasised, 'It's important to know about the young person, not to make assumptions about them.' (School 9/Hub 2). The Finished at School project enabled this school to build on their existing good practice. In other cases, the project enabled schools to make the internal changes necessary to begin planning for transition well in advance (see 3.2.2).

In the experience of some college staff interviewed, it continued to be difficult to get some schools outside the Finished at School hub to understand that transition planning needs to begin two years in advance and that this, in turn, means that schools and parents need to work together to support the young people to make an informed choice about their desired post-school destination early on. Related to this point about 'informed choice', one issue was raised by a College 1 course manager who spoke about how, among the hub schools, where students had not yet made a post-school choice, there was a reluctance to allow the college to have information about the names of learners with autism for the purposes of the Finished at School programme for fear that the hub college would try to influence that decision.³⁵

By contrast, in Hub 3's School 1, because of the Finished at School programme, the local college was invited to attend all the Year 10 Reviews for students with autism to speak directly to the parent and young person. Figure 5 summarises the benefits of this for both parents and students, from the school lead's point of view.

³⁵ This issue was only raised in Hub 1, perhaps because there was more of a local college market there, with different colleges competing for students.

Figure 5 **Benefits of having a college representative at a Year 10 Review**

The [college] comes to the Year 10 Reviews as well now for the autistic students and that has come through the project.

And what difference do you think that makes?

I think **because both parents and students are there**, it gives them the opportunity to start thinking about college in a way that they probably may not have thought about. Thinking about the next step, it just gives them that point of reference, really, and a friendly face, and somebody they can ask a few questions and get the ball rolling really.

I think it's just reassuring, particularly **for parents**, to have that face so that they know somebody is thinking about this. It's not all down to them. They're not on their own. They don't suddenly have to make all these difficult decisions by themselves. Just to have that support there and to have that contact started, I think, is really important. And then they can find out about open evenings and start thinking about it. So I think it really does help.

And **for the students**, of course, change is very difficult so the sooner you can start that process and get them thinking about it the better. Because they do tend to panic and, if they can get that initial panic done well before Year 11 and their exams, then, hopefully, by the time they're doing that stage, they've got over that and they're thinking positively about it.

Source: Interview with School 1 lead, November 2014

Starting person-centred transition planning at least two years in advance allowed time for meaningful student choice about where they wanted to go after school. This was an important aspect of the learning that grew out of the programme, as the following quotation illustrates:

What the Finished at School project did was it made me think of everybody – that everybody [making a transition] should be offered that intensity of support. I tried to mirror that for the other students and it has changed my practice, for example, in the thoroughness of the work of exploring all the options; that the young people have a right to choice. We've developed a

running diary for each student now that includes photos of all the places they've visited and sets down their views about each one so they can go back over it and be clear in their choice.'

(School 3/Hub 4)

3.2.2 Regular visits from and to the local college

One of the benefits of the improved relationships created through the Finished at School hubs was that school staff and young people with autism began to visit the local college more, and college staff began to visit the local hub schools. This **physical movement of people between the two different worlds of school and college** was the main way in which an increased familiarisation and understanding of the two environments grew out of the project. (See Chapter 7 for the practical results of this in relation to adapting the college environment.) Examples included:

- A hub school hosting a 'Moving On' event bringing together a wide range of post-school providers and inviting parents and young people from that and other local schools to attend (e.g. Hub 2/School 9).
- Hub colleges hosting transition events bringing together a wide range of providers relevant to the transition *out of* college (e.g. College 2; College 4).
 - In College 2, this was shifted from May to December because of having learned from the project the time needed to put in place supportive transition processes.
- Staff and students with autism visiting all their local FE colleges (School 10/Hub 1).
- Taster days at college when young people with autism (usually accompanied by at least one member of school staff) could experience for themselves what a morning or an afternoon or even a whole day in college would be like, and could also experience a particular college course (all the hub colleges).
 - In College 1, taster sessions were also used to prepare learners with autism for the transition from one course to the next.
- Link courses (existing or newly established through the Finished at School programme) which enabled young people with autism to have a regular weekly session at college usually studying one college course per term or half-term (all the hub colleges).
 - In College 2, a small room was allocated to first one, then two, hub special schools to use regularly once a week to help familiarise the

young people with autism with the college over a school year. Each school taught its own curriculum during this time.³⁶

Figure 6 provides some illustrative quotations from school and college staff about the enhanced taster experiences offered because of the Finished at School programme.

³⁶ Over time, this practice also provided opportunity for a regular point of contact, if desired, between Cohort 1 students who had transitioned to the college and their Cohort 2 peers still at school, and maintained opportunity for contact between the Cohort 1 learners and their former school staff.

Figure 6 Enhanced taster experiences, illustrated from Hub 4 examples

‘We’ve always had a good relationship with the college but this time I was allowed to walk around college with the student and get a feel of the place and take photos specifically for that student showing what he could expect, specific to him. [...] We had a taster session and I asked if we could come back to do things like use the canteen. This student has a nut allergy so we took photos of the medical room and were able to assure him that he’d be able to take in his own packed lunch. We spoke to staff in the canteen and he was reassured that they knew how serious his allergy is. He used the photos over the summer to remind and reassure himself about starting in September. [...] It’s important for parents to be at all the taster days so they can ask questions and be able to say, ‘This is what’s needed for my son or daughter’.

(School 3/Hub 4)

‘We are a structured, secure environment so there is high anxiety about going on to a less structured college. In Years 10 and 11, the anxiety increases and so we need to alleviate that through supporting the young people to take baby steps in to college.’

(School 6/Hub 3)

College 4 was actively looking to enable ‘in-fill’ in existing classes to give prospective students more than just a ‘taster’ of the course they were considering, but a real experience of what it would be like.

‘Taster sessions are vital to make learner choice meaningful. We set the dates in advance and make it compulsory that every prospective learner attends at least one – but they can come along to as many as they like.’

(College 4, specialist autism provision tutor)

Source: interviews with school and college staff, winter 2014/15

3.2.3 Improved information about college options

The discussions in the hub meetings, as well as other forms of data-gathering undertaken because of the Finished at School programme³⁷, alerted the hub colleges to the need to improve the quality and quantity of information about college options reaching school staff, pupils and parents.

In College 1, this improved information-sharing was facilitated by the re-establishment of direct communication from the college to the schools (previously this had happened via the Connexions advisers). Indeed, in all the hubs, staff from the hub colleges visited the schools in person to talk to staff, students and parents. School staff valued this enhanced information, knowing how important it was for both the young people and their parents to understand some of the differences between a school and a college offer – such as that the college had shorter terms and did not offer a five-day a week curriculum.

Other examples of improved information about college options included:

- Open evenings run specifically for young people with autism and their parents to accommodate the fact that the general college open days were too over-whelming for these young people (College 2).
- The inclusion of information about supported learning courses within the mainstream college prospectus (College 3).
- The creation of new, detailed leaflets about the content of courses suited to learners with complex autism and/or about the types of support offered to learners with autism regardless of what level of course they were studying (e.g. Colleges 3 and 4).

(The improvements made in schools sharing information about the young people with the colleges are covered in 3.2.5 and in Chapter 6.)

3.2.4 Greater involvement of parents in the process

Because of the person-centred focus of the Finished at School programme, the hubs all recognised the importance of not only taking into account the views of the young people with autism but also of their parents. As a result, parents' need to have information about the local college and the opportunity to visit were taken on board.

³⁷ Such as interviews, focus groups or questionnaires asking the views about transition of the 2013-14 cohort of students with autism and their parents. This happened in at least three of the four colleges.

Examples included:

- A regular newsletter for parents of young people with autism transitioning to college (College 2)
 - '[The parent newsletter] gives early information for parents about what is going to be available at [College 2]. It's been brilliant. The college really has pulled out all the stops.' (School 13/Hub 2).
- College staff visiting the hub schools to explain directly to parents the college offer (e.g. College 2; School 3/Hub 2; College 3; School 11/Hub 3).
 - In Hub 2, one of the hub special schools invited the college in to host a drop-in evening from 4-6pm for all transitioning students and their parents. This was 'very well-attended and got good feedback' (College 2 lead).
 - In Hub 3, a coffee morning was held in each of the hub schools attended by college representatives, plus a parent of a learner with autism who had made a successful transition to the college the previous year. The plan was for these events to become part of the annual cycle of transition-focused planning.
- Hub colleges (2 and 3) hosting regular coffee mornings for parents of students with autism due to transition from school.

The value of 'getting the parents on board' was emphasised by a local authority transitions officer in Hub 3. In her view:

'The college lead coming to talk to the parents at the school was a really good idea. [...] It was new for the college to go in to the school and talk to the parents as a group and for the school to back that up as well.'

(Local transitions officer, Hub 3)

She also commented on the 'effective' use of a 'parent who championed the project' during these events because, in her view, 'parents are more likely to believe other parents'. As a result, she argued, 'the tide has turned' towards the school suggesting the local college as a positive option to parents of young people with autism.

The importance of the partnership with the parents, established in school, being extended to the new college environment was emphasised by one college tutor. Her

view was that the role of the parent as part of the student's 'network of support' was vital:

'I'm not just taking in the learner; I'm taking on a family too. I'll be dealing with them for two years. So I make sure that, in that initial interview, I set out my expectations of the parents too – e.g. that they reply to any e-mails from college; that they attend review meetings here; we have an open door policy and so we want parents to communicate with us. [...] The most successful students have a good network of support around them so I don't want to interview learners with a school representative with them; I want them to come with their parents/carers.'

(College 4, specialist autism provision tutor)

Eight of the nine parents who returned the postal questionnaire wrote about their involvement in transition planning (Figure 7).

Figure 7 Parents' views about their involvement in transition planning

Question: Please tell us how involved (or not) you were in the discussions and planning for your son or daughter's next placement after school.

Responses:

Young person was still at school (Year 10)

This has been discussed but nothing decided upon yet – my son is not always happy talking about college. (Parent, R4)

Only just started. Early days as yet! (Parent, R5)

Young person was still at school (Year 11)

We have been very involved and those involved have been very responsive to our concerns. (Parent, R9)

Young person had moved on to college

I was there every step. Maybe more than needed because my son had already made a decision to go to college. (Parent, R1)

I was involved and planning for son when he left school because he already knows what college he want to go [to]. (Parent, R3)

Looked at college prospectuses and spoken with school Connexions. (Parent, R6)

I was involved and I visited the college with my son. (Parent, R7)

Very involved. (Parent, R8)

Source: Parent questionnaire, Feb 2015 (112 sent out, 9 returned).

(For parental involvement in person-centred annual reviews, see 3.2.6).

3.2.5 Enhanced or new implementation of one-page profiles

As noted in Chapter 2, the training undertaken as part of the programme led to most of the schools adopting the use of one-page profiles, or adapting their pre-existing use to be more in line with the person-centred planning training. For example, School 9/Hub 2 changed from its previous school-focused personal profiles to the one-page profiles focused on the young person's perspective. This school also adapted the training to fit the young people in their school. For example, they did not

use the word 'questions' in relation to building the one-page profile, instead they initiated a person-centred 'conversation'. This was not always easy for the young person:

'Thinking about the future is still really difficult. Some don't *want* to think about it. Some *can't* imagine next week, never mind in x years' time.'

(School 9/Hub 2)

Another school in the same hub (School 7/Hub 2) took this difficulty on board and ran a Transitions Club every Friday afternoon for its Y11 and Y14 leavers. This focused on self-awareness, what they might want for the future, choices, discussions about what college is for, and visits from college staff.

The person-centred approach to developing one-page profiles had 'changed' the practice of a very experienced Transitions Coordinator in one special school involved in the project:

'The project has changed my practice - for example, having as the starting point that quality time with the student. We always did, but this was more thorough. Now I have a long list of questions I go through – what are you good at? What do you like? And we keep coming back to them every so often in the curriculum, for example in Social Skills, in PSHE, in Community Skills. It's all about the learners finding themselves and their strengths. That shift to helping people to understand what their strengths are, because you spend that quality time, and so then they *want* to come to their Reviews. Even when people aren't quite sure, you can offer them options to help them think it through; for example, do you want to be living with your parents? or living with other young people?'

(School 2/Hub 4)

3.2.6 Enhanced or new implementation of person-centred reviews

Again as noted in Chapter 2, the training undertaken as part of the programme led to most of the schools adopting a more person-centred approach to their annual reviews, or at least adapting their pre-existing approach to be more in line with the spirit of the person-centred approach experienced during the training. For example, one special school began to *involve parents much more* in the reviews (and to a more limited extent the young people also). The assistant headteacher said that the PCP training was the 'single most useful piece of training' he'd had in many years:

‘Our parents and carers feel more included. We provide tea and coffee and we have the ‘prompting questions’ displayed around the room. This year, we’ve done 20 annual reviews and in each case parents and carers have taken part really enthusiastically. The questions have helped to shape the conversation. Parents are less intimidated – they look at the prompt questions around the room and feel more confident to join in.’

(School 12/Hub 4)

This example shows how schools built on their pre-existing practices, In this case, reviews that were truly person-centred from [the student’s](#) point of view would be another stage of that development.

On the other hand, one parent of a young man, whose needs required a move to an independent, specialist college, spoke about the need to ‘weigh up’ the views of the parent and the young person expressed in the review meetings:

‘The school’s Transitions Coordinator did a *huge* amount of work to make the last annual review more [name of son]-centred. But you have to be careful to weigh up the young person’s view and the parent’s view. The parent is the one holding it all together. So the person-centred planning process mustn’t be a prison that you can’t escape: it must be realistic. It has to be done in partnership with the parent because it has to be do-able by everybody.’

(Parent, School 3/Hub 4)

There were also [practical constraints](#) on what some schools could do. For example, in Hub 3, the School 1 lead stated that, ‘the impact that the project has had on our annual reviews is to make them much more person-centred’. The school lead had trialled holding a person-centred review, as demonstrated during the training, and found it to be ‘very effective’. However, she also reported that, ‘It was very difficult to transfer [the information it generated] on to a normal statement review form’. As a result, the school took the decision not to ‘follow the entire training’; instead, they were, ‘taking elements of [the person-centred approach modelled in the training] and adapting it to make it more workable in a mainstream setting’. For example, the time allocated was less than in the training but the reviews were made less formal in terms of the seating arrangement, the student was there from the start to greet everyone and to offer them a drink and a biscuit. This, ‘made it much more comfortable for them’, rather than being expected to come in and join the meeting at the end, as had happened before. The main constraint for this school (and others)

was that it proved not possible to gather the relevant professionals in one place at one time – medical and mental health professionals, for example, were reported as being, ‘not available to attend’.

Table 3 shows the responses of all 9 responding parents to relevant questions in an anonymous questionnaire.

Table 3 **Nine parents’ views about annual reviews and One-page profiles**

<i>(On a scale of 1 to 5, please tick one box in each row to show how much you agree or disagree with each statement.)</i>	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
Thinking about my son/daughter:	1	2	3	4	5
a) The last Annual Review meeting seemed more centred on his/her views than previous Review meetings.	1		3	3	2
b) My views as parent were included more in his/her last Annual Review meeting than previous Review meetings.			2	6	1
c) My son/daughter has made, or contributed to, a one-page profile about him/herself, setting out key information that will help others to understand his/her strengths and needs.			3	4	2

Source: Questionnaire sent to 112 project parents in February 2015. Nine responses received.

3.2.7 Enhanced or new emphasis on preparing for adulthood

The enhanced or new emphasis on preparing for adulthood grew out of the person-centred reviews and the increased awareness of the need to prepare young people for the transition from college as well as to college. (And, of course, this was all in keeping with the emphasis on preparing for adulthood in the Children and Families Act 2014 and the new *SEND Code of Practice: 0-25 years*.) This led at least some of the project schools, which previously had not done so, to seek work experience for their students with autism.

Nevertheless, it was clear from some parent responses that this was an area where more work was needed (Figure 8).

Figure 8 Parent views about preparing their son/daughter for adulthood

Please tell us your views of how best you and your son/daughter can be supported to plan and prepare for your son/daughter's future as an adult (education and employment; independent living; health; friends and relationships; participating in society).

Young person was still at school (Year 10)

I am worried sick at the thought of it all as his lack of social skills and behaviour problems make me worry about, how he can achieve anything. Don't know about support as it has not been discussed in depth at this stage (Parent, R4).

Young person was still at school (Year 11)

Responsive agencies that understand our son's needs are complex and individual. (Parent, R9)

Young person had moved on to college

I feel they should be supported in their strengths that may allow them to secure employment in that area. My son loves books and reading, making frequent trips to the local library. I feel he could do a job like this and thoroughly enjoy it. (Parent, R1)

We are preparing him for adulthood, his social worker and myself. Sometimes it can be difficult because of his understand[ing]. (Parent, R3)

More visits to colleges. (Parent, R6)

We do need help in the future to know what is the next stage and also for [Name of son] to decide what he wants to happen, socially what is available. (Parent, R8)

Source: Parent questionnaire, Feb 2015. 112 sent out; 9 responses received.

3.2.8 Colleges feeding back to schools about how the transition to college had gone for their former pupils

Schools appreciated when the college hub lead, or a colleague, fed back to them how their students had settled in to college. Perhaps surprisingly, the relationships established in the Finished at School hubs did not lead to all the hub colleges routinely doing this. This was something that all the schools wanted – even just an e-

mail report would be valued, although some schools suggested a regular feedback meeting held in late September/October every year. This feedback would enable the creation of a learning loop between school and college about what had gone well, what needed to change and how they might tackle that. In at least one college (College 2), feedback to the schools did happen routinely.

3.3 Chapter summary

This chapter has focused on improvements made to person-centred transition planning because of the Finished at School programme. In terms of system-level local change, the creation of a hub focused on improving planning for transitions from school for young people with autism was viewed as having been beneficial. The hub also improved confidence around implementing the 2014 SEND Code of Practice and acted as a node for local intelligence about gaps in provision for young people with autism.

In terms of operational changes to person-centred transition planning made within schools and colleges, the programme was reported to have had a positive impact on day-to-day practices related to transition planning for young people with autism. For example, it had encouraged those who had not already adopted the practice to begin transition planning at least two years in advance; it increased visits of school staff and students with autism to college and of college staff to schools; the quality of information shared with colleges by schools improved, as did the involvement of parents in transition planning. In addition, the programme led to greater use of one-page profiles and a new or enhanced emphasis on preparing for adulthood.

4 Impact of improved planning on young people's transitions

The evaluation of the Finished at School programme sought to find out what, if any, differences the programme made to **the experiences of transition from school** for the young people in the project. In this chapter, the evidence is set out of how the changes to strategic and operational practices reported in Chapter 3 impacted on the transitions of the young people. First, the focus is on the young people with autism in Cohort 1, that is, those who moved on from school to new destinations in September 2014. In the second part of the chapter, the focus shifts to actual and planned improvements made to benefit young people moving on from school in later years (Cohorts 2 and 3). In this chapter, space is deliberately given to the voices of the young people and their parents.

4.1 Impact of improved planning for Cohort 1

The section reports first on the post-school destinations of Cohort 1. Then the views of the 12 Cohort 1 young people, interviewed by the researcher across the four hub colleges, are summarised. Finally, the views of 6 Cohort 1 parents are reported from responses to a postal questionnaire.

4.1.1 Positive destinations

There were some discrepancies in school and college views about the number of young people identified as being in Cohort 1. At least in part, this was because of some uncertainty about which transition pathways and/or year groups counted for the project. For example, some project schools only went up to Year 11. Routinely, some of these Year 11 pupils would make a transition to another local school that had Sixth Form provision. Equally, some of them might choose to go to a local FE college. Other project schools were special schools that catered for students up to the age of 19 (Year 14). In these schools, pupils might choose to transition to post-school after Year 11, after Year 13 or after Year 14. A second reason for the numbers discrepancy was that there was some uncertainty about which students counted as having the 'complex autism' required to be included on the project. For these reasons, it proved impossible to reconcile Cohort 1 numbers, based on interview data from school and college leads. Figure 6 therefore provides the *college* perspective as to how many young people transitioned to the hub colleges through the Finished at School project.

Figure 9 Post-school destinations of Cohort 1 (College perspectives)

Overall:

All made positive transitions (N = 45):

- to the 4 hub FE colleges
✓ 30 of 45
- to other general FE colleges
✓ another 4
- to specialist FE colleges
✓ another 4
- to school Sixth Form
✓ another 7

By hub:

Hub 1

- **Nine of 11** identified young people moved from school to the hub college.
- One went to a **special school** (because of 'serious safeguarding issues').
- One went to **another local general FE college** (to do a course not offered at the hub college).

Hub 2

- **Four of six** identified young people moved from school to the hub college.
- **In addition**, one young person not in education, employment or training (NEET) was picked up by a hub partner organisation and, because of the project, was supported to make a positive transition to the hub college.
- Two went on to **Sixth Form in a local school**.

Hub 3

- **Eleven of 15** identified young people moved from school to the hub college.
- Four went to **specialist further education**.

Hub 4

- **Six of 13** identified young people moved from school to the hub college.
- Three of the other seven went to **other local FE colleges**.
- The remaining four went to **a different school Sixth Form**.

Source: interviews with college leads, autumn 2014

The figures shown in Figure 6 are testimony **to the success of the Finished at School Programme**. All 45 young people in the identified first Cohort moved on to positive post-school destinations.

4.1.2 Young people's views about the person-centred planning (Cohort 1)

During a visit to each hub college, the researcher met and interviewed 12 young people in total. These were:

- In College 1 – three young men (Paul, John, Rob³⁸).
- In College 2 – two young women (Helen, Kayleigh) and one young man (Brian).
- In College 3 – five young men (Trevor, Lance, Kevin, Luke, Jay).
- In College 4 – one young woman (Sukisha)³⁹.

Their experiences of the transition to college are described in turn.

4.1.2.1 College 1

Paul had **visited the college a few times** before he arrived in September 2014. He was the only one from his school on his course but he recognised others from his school around college. He thought college was, 'perfectly fine' and he liked his course. However, he had no memory of having created a one-page profile and, when shown 'his' by the college lead, he stated that it was not accurate and had been created by his support assistant.⁴⁰ This illustrates the importance of **the process** by which a one-page profile is created. His **message** to his peers back in school was to prepare a transition Plan B and C (Paul had not achieved the grades he needed to stay on at school to do A levels which had been his Plan A.) He also suggested that they should start to prepare for having, 'more independence' at college.

John remembered doing his **one-page profile** and proudly shared it with the researcher. However, as he had been very unhappy in his Sixth Form 'segregated' (his word) class for young people with autism, he also reported that the only reason he had agreed to 'answer all the questions' involved in drawing up his profile was that he believed it would help him 'escape' from his school. Again, this illustrates the very different meanings a one-page profile can have for the young person compared to a member of staff. Prior to arriving at college in September 2014, he had attended an interview at college with his mother and then had attended an Open Day. In his age 11-16 school, he had, 'attended college once a week to do **tasters** of some lessons.

³⁸ All names given to the young people are pseudonyms.

³⁹ In addition, two young men from Cohort 1 were observed during a lesson but did not wish to be interviewed.

⁴⁰ The college lead immediately booked in a one-to-one session with him to begin the process of creating a new one-page profile.

We tried [different subject areas]. We had a taster of what courses there are here’.

His **message** to his peers back in Sixth Form was very positive:

‘It’s a lot bigger than [name of] School. I mean, you could fit about five schools in here! I’d just tell them, it might look intimidating but it’s not. It’s a friendly atmosphere; there’s a lot of stuff to do here. It’s a nice place to come to and you can learn a lot of different things here [he lists five very different courses available at the college].’

(John, College 1)

Rob reported that, for him, the transition from his small 11-16 secondary school to Sixth Form at another high school had been, ‘a bigger thing’, than the move to college. He’d then found the second transition on to college, ‘more stressful’. As he explained, ‘Stuff can get to my head. The thought of it.’ In his view, he would have preferred the adults around him to play it down: ‘It’s helpful if people *didn’t* make it [transition] out to be a big deal. Of course, it *is* a big deal.’

Before starting at the college, Rob had **visited, ‘quite a few times’**. Rob said these visits had made him feel, ‘a tiny bit less stressed’. Nevertheless, he had found starting at college difficult:

‘At the start, the pressure was overwhelming. I felt woozy and upset in my stomach but, as the days went by, it got more easier, just as it did [in his previous Sixth Form school].’

(Rob, College 1)

Rob’s **message** to his peers back in school was positive. He wanted to wish them ‘Good luck!’ and to tell them to, ‘Choose your own future!’. (Rob explained that it had ‘partly’ been his choice to move on to college. He implied that it was his parents who had chosen but said that it was ‘complicated to explain’ and that it had ‘happened quite a while ago’.) To help prepare his former peers for college, his message would be:

‘There are some things about college that you may disagree on. For example, you have to wear a lanyard with your photo, or it could be your jobs [i.e. course work] but you shouldn’t be afraid to ask for help from the staff.’

(Rob, College 1)

The College 1 lead reported that all nine of the Cohort 1 students had settled well into college life. One had benefited from, ‘a more gradual’ transition than the

others. The college had received a one-page profile about each of the students. This had, 'helped the staff'. This view was corroborated by a Level 1 course manager from the college who spoke of the value of the one-page profiles being that they were 'an insight' into the student's life. This member of staff described the two Cohort 1 young men in her class as being:

'a lot more confident than the others. [...] They became key members of the class from Day 1. [They were] a lot more at ease with the people and the area.'

(College 1 course manager)

This 'confidence' and 'ease' were believed to be because of the supported transition processes these young men had received.

4.1.2.2 College 2

Helen had felt, 'very sad' leaving school which had been, 'a home from home' for her. Before starting at college, she had had **a tour round the college** and an interview. During Sixth Form, she had **visited regularly** to work at college. She had no memory of her one-page profile or of her final annual review. Her **message** to her former peers still at school was that: 'They shouldn't be afraid to ask for help. It's up to you what you want to do in the future.'

Brian reported having **visited a few times**, prior to starting at college, and having had the chance to '**do lessons such as woodwork and gardening**', **at college beforehand**.

Kayleigh remembered making her **one-page profile**. She reported having found it hard to answer, 'all the questions', but did it anyway. She remembered, and shared, the positive things people had said about her: 'nice', 'kind', 'hard worker'.

The College 2 lead noted that the two project schools from which the four Cohort 1 students had come had *not* passed on to college the one-page profiles. Instead, each of the students, their college tutor and a speech and language therapist worked together to create these for the college setting. The lead reported that one of the student's own anxiety about the transition had been exacerbated by the parent's anxiety. Because of **the relationships developed in the hub**, the college had been able to contact the school to ask the school to support the parent and the college. In turn, the college tutor supported the parent and the student. The result was that the student stayed on the course. (Figure 10 tells this story from the school lead's point

of view.) The lead also noted that person-centred reviews were being used in the college, because of the programme.

Figure 10 Case study: NEET without the Finished at School programme?

‘Andrew⁴¹ was highly anxious, and his family too. He said he wouldn’t go to college and the family agreed with that.

We worked so closely together – Andrew, his parent, the college. I supported them at the interview at college. (The college told me when it was going to be and I was able to help him prepare and to support them through that.)

He started at college. We supported him at the beginning by encouraging him to attend and not drop out. He had a couple of weeks where he stopped going. His Mum phoned and said, ‘He’s not going back there’. Then the college contacted me and asked me to help. I spoke to the Mum and set up an interview and he is back and thriving.

The lecturer knew who to contact and phoned me on that day [that he left college]. We had built up that picture so they knew it wasn’t new; that it was real, long-standing anxiety. He’s a great sports leader. As part of his work placement, he’ll come back this school to do sports sessions and then do sports development in college.’

Source: Interview with School 7/Hub 2 lead, December 2014

4.1.2.3 College 3

Trevor remembered his **one-page profile** and had positive memories of the process of creating it. He said:

‘It was good fun. I think I remember. We all sat round in a circle with your friends and you had to write those words [points to ‘What people like and admire about me’]. Your friends wrote the words down about you. [...] ‘Honest’, I think was one of them. ‘Funny’. [...] You were allowed to do any [photo] you wanted to.’

⁴¹ ‘Andrew’ is a pseudonym.

(Trevor, College 3)

Trevor also remembered what he'd put in as being 'important to me' (family and religion) and what support he needed ('explanations. I need explanations'). He indicated that he understood that the purpose of the one-page profile was so that college staff would understand what he needed in order to learn as best as he could. He thought it had 'probably' helped achieve that.

Trevor and his classmates had **first visited the college** as a group **two years prior to him starting there**. He reported his response that day as having been, 'Wow! This is pretty cool!'. He then had **three link days** in college which he'd enjoyed.

Lance, Kevin and **Luke** were interviewed together. They had all moved on from the same special school. They had **visited three times**, prior to starting at college:

'We had link days before we went to college. These link days were to get to know the college better. It was a great experience. *What did you like about it?* I liked that the staff here taught us more about being independent and letting us do our own thing.'

(Lance, College 3)

Two of these three young men could only 'vaguely' remember creating one-page profiles. The third one said: 'Yeah, I did [make a **one-page profile**]. It was quite a long time ago. I think I can remember a few things. It said who I liked being with and stuff.'

In each case, their **parents had visited the college** prior to the young men starting there. They each felt that their parents were comfortable with them being at college. For example, one said: 'My parents, they weren't scared [about me starting at college]. They were kind of concerned but they were OK with it.' One of these young men reported that being at college had helped his parents to begin treating him as an adult, something the other two young men said their parents already did: 'My parents feel kind of the same but, as I'm in college, they're starting to treat me like an actual adult. [...] I'm feeling happy about that. Feeling glad.'

Jay was unusual among the young people interviewed in being able to give a detailed account of creating his **one-page profile** and to describe how he had used it to support his transition from a mainstream to a special school. Although this had happened outside of the Finished at School programme, his experience is a good illustration of how useful such documents can be and is therefore reported in full (see Figure 11).

Before starting at college in September 2014, Jay had **visited** in February/March 2014 and again just before the summer break. He found these visits useful:

‘Well, [otherwise] I would have found it a bit tricky but, with the visiting, it made me realise what the college is going to expect and what my Mum is going to expect for me.’

(Jay, College 3)

He reported that his mother, ‘sort of feels happy for me being at college’.

Figure 11 One young man talks about his one-page profile

‘Yes, I do remember when my Mum said I had to make a profile page like that [the researcher’s own profile, used as a visual prompt] so that the headteacher could look at it. My Mum helped me to do it. She got all of my old reports and showed it to the headmistress of the school I left. As well as that, I liked how I presented it.

How did you present it?

‘Well, when I arrived at the headmistress’ office, to show who I was, she talked about what the school’s like and showed us how many people are in the school and then I got my profile page out and showed her why I was going to be there. The headmistress liked it. I did have help a little bit because I got stuck on some of the questions.

The bit about what other people think of you?

I felt a little bit embarrassed because I don’t know these people who are asking me the questions but I could go and say about who I was. As well as that, I could just let someone else talk to them about me but then I didn’t want to do that because that would be disrespectful so I decided to do it myself. [...] At the end, I sort of felt confident. Because, at first, I was a bit nervous. As well as that, I didn’t want to let anyone I know down so I just wanted to let it all out.’

Source: Interview with Jay, College 3, December 2014

The College 3 lead reported that the young people who transitioned to college as part of the Finished at School project had **all had a one-page profile**. In his view, too, **all had benefitted from the person-centred annual review process** in terms of thinking about longer-term, adult futures represented in ‘much more aspirational’

outcomes. The lead also reported that, because of the Finished at School programme, there was a sense that parents, college and school were all there as a **network of support** for each young person.

4.1.2.4 College 4

Sukisha reported that the **tasters and link experiences** she undertook prior to starting at college had helped her transition, 'a lot':

'The college link helped a *lot* and the tasters that did. I came, like, every Thursday and that was good. I learned a lot whilst I was here. [I came] with 12 boys who were in my year. I did a Multimedia course. The taster days were good. They gave us an impress [ion] of what they do every day – no, four days a week, what courses they do. I wanted to see what site I wanted to be in. This one [specially for young people with autism] or on the main site. At first, I accepted a place in the main site but then, after talking to my sister, I just decided to come here instead because it's more, like, calm. It's very small but it's very calm and everyone is just *really* nice. I'd had a taster day in the main site and here and I decided to come here instead.'

(Sukisha, College 4)

Sukisha's **message** to her former peers back in school would be: 'College is fine! Don't stress about it! Don't stress about leaving.'

This message related to her own feelings of stress and distress about moving on to college:

'I know I was stressed about it [moving on] when I was in my last year, because I didn't know how I was going to feel. I was leaving everyone behind and I did feel a bit odd. But I did say that I would go back and visit and see everyone.'

(Sukisha, College 4)

The College 4 lead provided some information about two other Cohort 1 young people who had joined the main college. One had done a school link course beforehand and the other had taken part in a bespoke tour and a visit for one day to help him make the adjustment. The Finished at School programme, he said, 'made us aware' of what needed to be adjusted for learners with autism and of their individual needs; that it was not a case of, 'one size fits all.'

4.1.2 Parents' views (Cohort 1)

No parents of Cohort 1 were interviewed⁴² but six responded to a postal questionnaire. Table 4 shows that all six agreed their son or daughter was attending a post-school destination of their choice. It also shows that five of the six agreed that their son or daughter was receiving support to plan for adulthood and to take part in all desired aspects of college life. The sixth parent neither agreed nor disagreed about these two points.

Table 4 Parents views of the transition (Cohort 1)

<p>• (On a scale of 1 to 5, please tick one box in each row to show how much you agree or disagree with each statement.)</p> <p>My son/daughter has already left school</p>	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
	1	2	3	4	5
a) My son/daughter is now attending the college (or other place) of his/her choice.				2	4
b) My son/daughter is receiving support to plan for adulthood that takes account of his/her autism.			1	3	2
c) My son/daughter is supported to take part in all aspects of college life that s/he wishes to.			1	3	2

Source: Parent questionnaire, Feb 2015. N = 6.

The views summarised in Table 4 are specific to each parent and are not generalizable. They are reported as representing the views of individuals.

4.2 Additional improvements in place or planned for subsequent cohorts

In this section, the focus is first on the small number of Cohort 2 young people (N = 3) and parents (N = 5) whom the researcher met during a visit to each of three hub schools (all special schools). The schools, parents and young people were:

- In Hub 2⁴³ – School 9: Zara's mother and father⁴⁴; David; David's father.
- In Hub 3 – School 11: Nikita; Nikita's mother.
- In Hub 4 - School 3: Theo; Theo's mother⁴⁵.

⁴² Interviews with parents were requested but did not take place for a variety of reasons.

⁴³ A visit to a Hub 1 school was repeatedly postponed by the school and finally refused, due to pressures of school life.

⁴⁴ Zara's parents did not want the researcher to speak to their daughter and this was respected even though the school staff believed Zara would have been happy to be interviewed.

⁴⁵ Theo chose to talk though his annual review PowerPoint presentation instead of being interviewed. His mother was interviewed by phone at a later date.

4.2.1 Young people and parents' views (Cohorts 2 and 3)

4.2.1.1 Hub 2/School 9 (special)

Zara's parents' experiences related to her planned transition from school

Zara's parents explained that Zara was an 'out-of-borough' pupil at School 9. She had autism, global developmental delay and physical difficulties. She was in Year 14 in 2014-15. During her Year 13 (2013-14), they reported that her **annual review** had been, 'completely different' to previous ones. They described how it was structured around a set of questions, such as, 'what do you like the best? who do you get on well with?' Although Zara's parents did not use the term, it was clear that they were describing **the person-centred approach** used in the school as a result of the Finished at School programme (about which they were not aware). Listening to Zara's parents talk about their experience of this review, it seemed likely that they had not been briefed in advance about the changed structure of the review or the reasons for this. In their view, the focus on Zara's likes and dislikes, strengths and areas for development, was evidence that the school had, 'given up' on her making any further progress. This is an example of an unintended consequence arising from introducing a new approach to the review meetings, perhaps without sufficient communication to parents about the change.

Prior to the Finished at School programme, in Zara's Year 10, her parents had attended an evening event where representatives of 'respective colleges' had been available to talk to. Zara's needs were discussed and her parents collected various college prospectuses. According to her parents, the fact that Zara was not capable of independent travel was viewed by the colleges as an indication that she would not be suited to their courses. Subsequently, the school arranged for Zara to have independent travel training but the outcome was agreement all round that independent travel was not a realistic target for Zara. Zara's parents, supported by the school and her social worker, applied to attend a catering course at her home LA's local FE college. The application depended on Zara receiving support through a local Buddy Scheme. Zara's parents reported that after a year of hearing nothing, they were told the Buddy Scheme had been stopped. They recounted a similar tale of applying for a Direct Payments for Zara and again nothing happening in response. At time of interview, this issue was being chased up by Zara's Connexions adviser.

Zara's parents had applied for **a specialist residential college** which they had visited and found supportive and, in their view, ideally suited to Zara's needs. They

reported that the school were, 'very pessimistic', telling them that the funding would not be forthcoming. Zara's parents believed that,

'The Council doesn't want to pay. They want to keep everyone in-borough. They are trying to push us to [local hub college] because it's been extended. They've made a big investment in expanding the provision for special needs.'

(Zara's parents, School 9/Hub 2)

At the time of interview (November 2014), Zara's parents had agreed **to visit the hub college** to see whether or not it could provide the 'immersive' environment they sought for their daughter. If it could, they would accept that; if not, they were determined to fight for her right to be educated in a specialist environment, suited to her complex needs.

Zara's parents had, then, had a somewhat negative experience of the intentions behind the Finished at School programme. It may be that, when they saw for themselves the facilities at the hub college, their views would change.

David, and his father's, experiences related to his planned transition from school

David was in Year 13 at School 9 and due to transition to college in September 2015. His father was very pleased about the 'really good' support the school had offered and the '**foresight**' they had shown about this transition: 'They've been planning for two to three years. That's what's really impressed me with them.'

David's Dad explained that the school had involved David in **a link course** with the local [hub] college which had begun in Year 10. Through this link, the students were, 'getting used to the idea of going to college'. In David's case, he was:

'so familiar with college, he sees that as the natural transition: to leave school and go on to college full-time. That idea has been in his head for three years. I really like the way they've handled that. Really good.'

(David's father, School 9/Hub 2)

The long-lasting link experience had enabled David to try out a number of different courses. This meant that:

'We can look at getting him on a course that he wants to do and that he's tried before. And because of their autism, they've got familiarised with the building over 2 or 3 years before they go there full-time. So he feels comfortable there, which is really important.'

(David's father, School 9/Hub 2)

David's dad also explained that David had had **work experience in Year 11** doing office duties in a local third sector organisation, which had gone well:

'It went very well. He grew in confidence after that period there with them. He absolutely grew in confidence and really enjoyed it. And I think it probably made him believe, 'Yeah, when I leave school, I'm going to get a job in an office'.

(David's father, School 9/Hub 2)

At time of interview, David had not yet made his **one-page profile** but the school lead had explained to David's Dad that this would happen and explained the process and purpose. David's father was positive about the idea that such a document would provide, 'enough information to start off on the right foot; fast information.' Indeed, he also suggested that a **one-page, laminated document for parents**, setting out all the things that had to be done towards a successful transition would also be very helpful.

David, himself, was **positive about College 2**: 'I think it is a nice environment', but still preferred school because he 'liked the people' in school and enjoyed using the sports hall. He believed that College 2 did not have a sports hall but was attracted by the college's Technology Centre where he'd done Woodwork. He was positive about the staff at College 2: 'I like them because they are really nice. They are good to me.' Nevertheless, he said he was, 'a little bit nervous about starting college. I feel I'm not ready to leave the school'. It helped him, though, knowing that he would start at college alongside, 'the people who I know from [school]'. He also talked about how hard it was to leave Sixth Form after already having gone through the difficult transition of leaving Year 11:

'I'm a little bit sad because I don't want to leave here [school]. I'd like to stay here for ever. [...] It's like leaving school again when you're in Sixth Form. You leave to go in Sixth Form because virtually you leave when you're in Year 11. [...] And when you leave Sixth Form, it's like you're leaving again.'

(David, School 9, Hub 2)

David had begun preparing for his **one-page profile**. He reported that what people liked and admired about him included that he could be, 'a little bit funny at times [i.e. a good sense of humour] and that he can also be a bit curious'.

4.2.1.2 Hub 3/ School 11 (special) - Nikita and her mother

During the 2013-14 academic year, Nikita and her mother had taken part in **the Finished at School hub's first person-centred annual review**. For that occasion, Nikita had prepared her **one-page profile** and a PowerPoint about herself. The researcher met Nikita and her mother together in October 2014 at **an informal coffee morning for parents of young people with autism** from the school who were interested in finding out about **the hub college's curriculum offer**. The school lead and two college representatives attended, as well as the hub's parent representative (a governor of School 11 and a parent of a young man at the college). No other parents turned up.

Nikita said that she **planned to move on to College 3 in September 2015** but saw this as only the first step in **her longer term plan**. She wanted to go to the hub college to strengthen her Life Skills and then to move on to another local college where she could do a vocational course in the area she wished to pursue as an adult: animal welfare. She was doing **a work experience placement** in the school office, undertaking administrative tasks and meeting and greeting visitors to the school. She escorted visitors to their meeting room or on a tour round the school, as appropriate. In addition, she had had work experience at a local city farm. This was relevant to her aspirations and the plan was for her to repeat that.

Nikita had previously attended a local secondary school where she had been bullied. During her first **taster day at the hub college**, she had encountered one of the girls from that school who had bullied her. She and her mother had been dismayed by this. The school and college leads worked together to put a plan in place to ensure that Nikita would be in a different group from this girl on the second taster day. This had reassured both Nikita and her mother.

As **a development of the hub links**, the school was planning to move Nikita's class to a classroom on the edge of the hub's mainstream school site. There, the special school lead was due to recreate the curriculum and environment and provide trained staff to model, for the mainstream staff, how learners like Nikita (i.e. relatively high-functioning) *could* be maintained in a mainstream school. Nikita's mother was worried about this, fearing Nikita would be bullied again. She was also worried about the cost of transport for Nikita to get to the mainstream school site.

Nikita had been the first young person in the local authority to have her statement of special educational needs **transferred to an Education, Health and Care plan**. The school lead was not particularly happy about the process (reporting for example that some professionals had met the parents before observing the young people and therefore had set inappropriate 'outcomes within 12 months').

Nikita and her mother were positive about College 3 and about their experience of the person-centred annual review and of the one-page profile. At time of interview, there was still an issue about how the plan to enable Nikita to practice **independent travel** would be put in to practice, but that was being addressed.

4.2.1.3 Hub 4: School 3 (special) – Theo and his mother

Theo was in Year 14, his third year at School 3. He had Down's Syndrome and complex autism. He was accepting of his Down's but did not like being labelled with 'autism'. He chose to meet with the researcher but also chose not to be interviewed. Instead, he presented his PowerPoint that he had prepared for this **annual review** (as a direct result of the Finished at School programme). On the day of his annual review, Theo had not felt able to present his **PowerPoint** to the group of people there. Instead, his school's transition coordinator did this on his behalf. Theo's PowerPoint gave a vivid picture of his strengths and areas where he needed support and of his many interests and talents. It covered the people who were important to him and his hopes and dreams for his future as an adult. It also covered his plan to **move on to a specialist, residential further education college** after school. He had **visited** this college and had loved the experience. **Further visits were planned** during Year 14 to familiarise him further. He had **a booklet with photos** of all the key areas of the college and of key staff members there.

Theo's mother was interviewed by telephone. She reported that Theo had been 'desperately unhappy' in his mainstream primary school. He moved from that school to a special school where he stayed until he was 16. During his Year 11 in that school, he had the opportunity to spend one day a week at a local FE college. His mother's account of this 'disastrous' experience (Figure 14, Chapter 7) is, in itself, a justification for the need for programmes like Finished at School.

As a result, Theo moved on to School 3, where he settled well. His mother reported that School 3 were 'very skilled' at meeting his needs and that they had 'changed the curriculum' to do so.

Regarding transition planning for when Theo finished at school, Theo's mother emphasised the importance of not losing sight of **the parental perspective** in person-centred planning. She acknowledged and valued how much more 'Theo-centred' Theo's most recent **annual review** had been, as a result of the transition coordinator's efforts. (We know from interviewing that member of staff that the more person-centred review was a result of the impact of the Finished at School programme on her.) Nevertheless, Theo's mother argued that 'person-centred' planning had to take note of the limitations of giving greater weight to the young person's views compared to that of the parent:

'[...] what person-centred planning actually means is that **somebody does it on behalf of the young person**. I'm very aware that Theo has said things that are not the case; they're not actually particularly true, and that's because probably he's heard somebody else say it. [...] So I think one has to be unbelievably careful, and I noticed the emphasis is, 'And greater weight will be given to what the young person says they themselves want than to what the parental input is', which is good on the one hand but **the person holding it all together is going to be the parent**. And again it's this sense of being hoisted by one's own petard because, where person centre planning comes in is [from] HIV health back in the 80s and that's where we put the person centred plan together; they came from the work of Elizabeth Cooper Ross in the States, and it was the first time the patient was put at the heart of their plan. And **it's how it should be, it's how it should be, but you've got to be so careful that it doesn't become a prison from which you can't escape. And that [the plan] is realistic.**' [emphasis added]

(Theo's mother, School 3/Hub 4)

It had taken two years of college visits by Theo's mother to find the right specialist college for her son's complex needs. For her son, the transition planning had to include practice of living away from home. School 3 had been supportive of this, enabling Theo first to stay for his evening meal at school and gradually building up to him staying overnight at school. Her final choice was eventually fully supported by the social worker, Connexions adviser and the school but she was very aware that, as she put it, 'All decisions around our children are fiscally driven'. In this context, Theo's mother was concerned about **the new EHC plan process**, something she

reported was shared by other parents of young people with SEND with whom she was in touch:

It has always been about establishing precedent and [...] we have no precedence of the EHC plan. So that's going to make it very hard for all of us because we can't say [to the LA], 'Oy! You can't do that because this is how it's been done and you can't pretend that this isn't how it should be done'.'

(Theo's mother, School 3/Hub 4)

4.2.2.4 Parent questionnaire responses

Unfortunately, only three of 71 parents identified as belonging to Cohorts 2 and 3 of the Finished at School programme returned our questionnaire. Table 5 gives the responses of these three parents to our statements about transition planning. None of them 'strongly agreed' that their son or daughter was receiving support to plan for life after leaving school that take account of his/her autism'. These views are **not generalizable** to the parents of Cohorts 2 and 3 of the Finished at School programme as a whole.

Table 5 Three parents' views about transition planning (Cohorts 2 & 3)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (On a scale of 1 to 5, please tick one box in each row to show how much you agree or disagree with each statement.) <p>My son/daughter is still at school</p> <p>Please write your son/daughter's Year here</p> <p>(e.g Y9) Y10 x 2 and Y11 x 1</p>	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
	1	2	3	4	5
a) My son/daughter is on track to select the college (or other place) of his/her choice for post-school.			2		1
b) My son/daughter is receiving support to plan for life after leaving school that takes account of his/her autism.		1	1	1	
c) My son/daughter is supported to take part in all aspects of school life that s/he wishes to.			1		2

Source: Parent questionnaire, Feb 2015. N = 3.

4.3 Chapter summary

This chapter has focused on the differences made by the programme to the transition experiences of the Finished at School young people. For Cohort 1, those who moved on from school in 2014, all 45 did so to a positive post-school destination. The majority moved on to a hub college (30 of the 45), with the others moving on to other general FE colleges, specialist FE colleges or school Sixth Forms. From interviews

with 12 of the Cohort 1 young people, it was clear that the more the young person had been involved in creating his or her one-page profile, the more that young person valued it. All the young people interviewed were very positive about the activities that had supported them to make an active choice of post-school destination and which had enabled them to feel more familiar and comfortable in the new college environment. The views of six Cohort 1 parents were also reported. These indicated that all six agreed their son or daughter was attending a post-school destination of their choice and that five of the six agreed that their son or daughter was receiving support to plan for adulthood and to take part in all aspects of college life that s/he wished to.

A small number of Cohort 2 experiences were reported, based on interviews with three young people and five parents. These experiences are not generalisable. Regarding the interviews, in each case, the young person was being educated in a special school. Zara's parents recounted a somewhat negative experience of the intentions behind the Finished at School programme but had agreed to visit the hub college to find out for themselves whether or not it could offer the environment they sought for their daughter. In the same school, David's father reported a very positive experience of person-centred support and forward planning for his son. David, too, was very positive about his experiences of the hub college and, despite being sad to leave school, was confident about starting at college alongside school peers. In a different school and hub, Nikita and her mother reported very positive experiences of the person-centred approaches to transition planning that were at the heart of the Finished at School programme. Nikita was the first young person in her local authority to have her statement of SEN transferred to an Education, Health and Care plan, a process that had been informed locally by the Finished at School programme (which had, of course, been informed in turn by the draft of the 2014 Code of Practice). Nikita was on course to move on to the hub college and had her next step after that also planned out. Finally, in a third school and hub, Theo and his mother, were also very positive about the enhanced person-centred approach to transition planning experienced by Theo because of the programme. Theo was on track to move on to a specialist residential further education college that could meet his specific needs.

In addition, questionnaire responses from one Cohort 2 parent and two Cohort 3 parents were reported. Again, these are not generalizable. These gave a mixed

picture. None of them 'strongly agreed' that their son or daughter was receiving support to plan for life after school that took account of his/her autism.

5 STRONGER ASSESSMENT PROCESSES

In this chapter, the focus is on the ways in which the four hub colleges reviewed and enhanced their assessment processes, based on the greater knowledge they gained about their prospective students with autism through the Finished at School programme. The chapter is structured in four sections, each one looking at one college hub. The core theme is that the Finished at School programme encouraged college staff to collect more and better quality information earlier about their prospective learners with autism.

5.1 Assessment at College 1

The lead for College 1 was aware that the college's existing assessment processes were, 'too intensive especially for those with lower levels of cognitive abilities'. The aim was to have a more 'user-friendly' assessment, possibly picture-based for Entry level students. At the time of the interview, the college lead was **actively seeking to improve assessment processes** for Entry level, Level 1 and Level 2 learners.

In particular, College 1 had as a target for the Finished at School project to identify a programme that would enable the college **to assess social and emotional learning**. The college learned through the hub that one of the hub special schools used 'MAP'. The college trialled this programme and its use was also being explored by other schools in the hub. The aim was for all of the schools to use one assessment tool in order to support and enhance school to college progression and progression within college. A practical issue was that not every college tutor had a computer in their classroom so there was work to be done on how best to share individual learner targets.

The college course leaders interviewed were enthusiastic about the opportunities that improved transition planning offered for increasing the amount and quality of information the college could gain about each learner in advance of them starting at college. The **one-page profile** was deemed by one to be, 'fairly useful', but, by virtue of having been created in the school environment, did not always prove a reliable guide for learner strengths and weaknesses in the college environment. This tutor suggested that assessment would be improved by having the students in for **one day of practical activities** in order to better understand the level of support that should be put in place – and funded – for them.

The school leads from Schools 5 and 8 in Hub 1 agreed that the greater involvement of the college in transition planning had resulted in the college being far more aware of the need to carry on in college the support offered in school. For example, these school leads spoke about how the college had adapted its ways in order to provide a structured day for students with autism, and to provide them with prior knowledge of where to go and when to do that, and of the quietest route from A to B.

John, a Cohort 1 student at College 1, reported that for him the level of work he was doing was, 'the right level' because, although sometimes he felt as if he was, 'drowning in it', nevertheless, he was, 'coping'. Rob was less sure that he was on the right level of course. He was, '50:50' on whether or not he could, 'handle' the work he was given.

5.2 Assessment at College 2

The college lead and a local authority transitions officer from Hub 2 both noted that assessment processes at College 2 had been strengthened by the fact that speech and language therapists were sitting in on interviews and assessments and offering their professional guidance on the suitability of the college for each prospective learner with autism. (The hub lead reported that this development was not part of the impact of Finished at School, having occurred separately.) In the transition officer's view, the way in which the Finished at School programme had benefitted assessment processes at the college was by having **created good link courses** for special schools. She argued for the importance of creating personalised link courses for young people who needed that as this, 'allows the college **to assess them more realistically**'. In her view:

The Finished at School programme has been a conduit to the providers' understanding what they need to do better: for example, sensory needs, behaviour that challenges, facilities and approaches to learning'.

(Local authority transition officer, Hub 2)

The School 7 lead in Hub 2 reported that **College 2 had changed its approach to gathering information about prospective students**. She reported that, historically, the college would get a letter asking them for information about the student and parents would be asked to send in school reports to the college. This had changed to a system whereby the college informed the school as to when the students were being interviewed and the school forwarded to the college all the relevant information about that student. Depending on the student's level of support needs, the school

might even attend the interview with the student. Through the hub, such a good relationship had developed that the school lead was confident that the college lead knew that the school could be contacted for any further information deemed necessary. Following a successful interview, the learner would be invited to an assessment at college. Again, College 2 informed the school of this so that the school could support the student to manage their anxiety about that assessment. As a result, this school lead believed that the students felt, 'excited and prepared'.

School leads from School 9 in Hub 2 reported that College 2 was, 'now listening' to the school's knowledge about the young people and their strengths. This was viewed as helping the college to assess the appropriate Level of course, even if other areas of skills and knowledge were not so advanced. In addition, they reported that College 2 staff came and observed the students in the school before they moved on to college.

Two of the Cohort 1 students interviewed at College 2 spoke about the level of their work. Helen said she had to, 'ask for help sometimes' but seemed happy with her course work. Brian reported that the work at college suited him better than the work he'd done at school.

5.3 Assessment at College 3

At College 3, assessment of prospective learners with autism was supported by the **one-page profiles**, viewed by the college lead as picking out what is important to the young person and how they can best be supported. The one-page profiles were viewed as being particularly useful for the LSAs and TAs preparing for the **link days**. The information they contained helped these staff to plan support for the group. The college was reviewing the activities on these link days to enhance the assessment process. The college also routinely received Section 139a learning needs assessments and the Y11 SEN statement.

College 3 had **three transitions staff members** whose job it was to get to know both prospective learners and their parents. They had begun to attend **Year 9 annual reviews** and intended this to become the norm. In time, they hoped it would lead to attendance at Y10 and Y11 reviews too. They used the opportunities provided by link courses to do Maths and English assessments in the form of games and 'fun activities'. The School 11 lead was impressed by the college's willingness to adapt to

each set of learners. This view was shared by the local authority transition officer interviewed.

Jay, a Cohort 1 student at College 3, reported that he found the lessons there, 'more easy' than at school because at college he received the support he needed. He was taught in a small group of seven young people with a tutor, a TA and a LSA.

5.4 Assessment at College 4

The College 4 lead explained that the assessment of individual needs and of curriculum progress in the mainstream college **had not been good enough**. For this reason, **changes were to be implemented for Cohort 2**, the class of 2015-16 cohort, involving college staff going to see students in school and tracking needs and progress from Y12 to Y14 and beyond.

In the specialist autism provision at College 4, assessment processes appeared to be **a strength**. The course tutor there reported that: **'We start assessment early. That's the key.** [...] School planning is getting better for example two years in advance.'

Figure 12 summarises the main points from the approach to assessment in this part of College 4.

The College 4 tutor from the specialist provision **suggested** that it would be a good idea to encourage schools to use **a standard transition pack that contained key information about each student** such as:

- The qualifications they already had so college could build on these.
- Copies of any psychological reports and reports from other professionals.
- Copies of the previous year's annual review paperwork.
- Information about any work experience undertaken.
- The name of a contact person to coordinate progression to college.

Figure 12 Illustrative example: Opportunities for gathering information used in assessment processes in College 4 specialist provision

- E-mail to each school providing information about college open days and interviews, viewed as part of 'training' schools to provide a list of potential students to the college.
- Open days.
- Interviews – with parents there too if possible.
- Taster sessions on timetabled dates – 'vital for learner choice'.
- link courses with local schools.
- Information from schools and from parents.
- Pupil profile from schools covering the four areas of difference typical of autism.
- Induction Week at start of new term – specific assessment tools:
 - Tools included: Skills for Life software to assess English and Maths.
 - In-house questionnaire to assess ICT.
 - Sensory assessment is from the AET Competency Framework.
 - Learning preferences assessed by a questionnaire from Businessballs.
- Asking the students what they needed to support their learning:
 - 'Your learner is your answer to everything. Ask them. If they can't verbalise, there are other ways that they can show you what they like. Observe them – your source is your learner'.

Source: interview, specialist autism provision tutor, January 2015

Sukisha, a Cohort 1 learner at College 4, said that, in her experience, school work had been, 'easy', but that work at college was, 'serious': 'it has to be done when it has to be done'. At college (and, previously, at School 3), she said she felt understood and supported: 'They listen to our opinions'.

5.5 Chapter summary

This chapter has focused on the enhancements made to assessment processes in the four hub colleges as a result of the Finished at School programme. The specific changes varied by college, as each built on, or revised, existing practice. The overall finding was that the programme encouraged college staff to collect more and better

quality information about their prospective learners with autism, and to do so in good time to enable appropriate planning for provision to be put in place to suit each learner. From the point of view of Cohort 1 learners interviewed at the hub colleges, the assessment processes seem to have resulted in the students being on courses that they viewed as at an appropriate level for them. Rob was the least sure of this, reporting that he was '50:50' on whether or not he could handle the work expected of him.

6 IMPROVED CURRICULUM PATHWAYS

The assessment information gathered (see Chapter 5) was used by the four colleges to, 'make the curriculum learning and teaching appropriate' (College 4 tutor). This chapter covers the development of the curriculum offers at the four college hubs as a result of the Finished at School programme. Like Chapter 5, it is structured in four sections, each one looking at one college hub.

6.1 Curriculum pathways at College 1

The College 1 lead reported that curriculum pathways were reviewed annually in the college. Because of the Finished at School programme, College 1 had made new links to external autism providers in order to develop suitable curriculum pathways for learners with autism. For example, one such new link was with [a mainstream school with an autism resource](#) for, 'more high functioning students', to learn about developing suitable curriculum pathways for these students. In addition, the college had made contacts with staff in [specialist residential colleges in the region](#) in order to learn more about how to develop its curriculum offer for learners with complex autism. Through this learning, the college was **developing its independent living provision** and **increasing access to work experience**. Support for learners with autism who also had **visual impairment** was also being developed based on knowledge sought from, and shared by, staff at a post-school college for visually impaired young people.

Because of the programme, the college had **developed a new Entry Level 1 programme** (with funding for the local authority). The programme enabled the college to accept a wider range of learners than before, including those with more complex autism who, previously, would have been placed in specialist colleges or not had access to post-school education at all. The programme incorporated Independent Living (for example, work skills, budgets, cooking, and personal development) and Vocational Learning. The College 1 lead raised an issue which was the lack of funding to offer residential 'stop-overs'. Also raised in interviews with college representatives was the issue that funding cuts to the Learning Disabilities Department meant that, for Cohort 2 learners requiring that provision, the curriculum offer was likely to be reduced from four days a week to three days a week: if that were to happen, it was noted that the curriculum would require a 'revamp'.

As part of ensuring students were on the most appropriate curriculum pathway for them, at College 1, every student had a 'Right Course Review' after six weeks in college. This enabled a two-way (college and student) check that the learner was at the right college doing the right course at the right level for them. Course tutors interviewed noted that, even if the learner with autism was on the right course at the right level, **motivation** could remain an issue. In one case, this was addressed by the tutor seeking to build a better understanding of the learner though engaging with him in leisure activities such as playing pool together at lunchtime. Another tutor spoke about having to adapt the learning styles to suit each group and, in particular, having to use more visual approaches for learners with autism. In addition, this tutor adopted the practice of teaching course theory using concrete examples to engage the learners. A particular teaching challenge reported by this tutor was the short attention span of one of the Finished at School Cohort 1 students. Overall, this tutor reflected that the Finished at School students who arrived in her class were, 'not *that* different from others in the class': that is, once the focus was on meeting individual needs rather than on the label, 'autism', these students could be included in the general further education teaching and learning environment.

In terms of **curriculum progression**, the College 1 lead reported that a lot of work had been done on the transition from Entry level 1 to Level 1 and from Level 1 to Level 2 courses. This had included work with the staff. For example, **Autism Champions** had helped staff become a lot more aware of the issues for learners with autism. It had also included work with staff and learners together. One young man (not directly involved in the project) had delivered a joint awareness session to staff and peers about his autism. The college lead viewed this as having been a successful way of raising awareness about the needs of learners with autism, as they progressed from one course to another.

Curriculum progression from school to college had also featured in hub discussions. Both the School 8 and School 10 leads spoke about this. The hub had encouraged **strong links between the schools and the college**, which had helped to ensure, for example, that the college was aware of recent changes in the Sixth Form curriculum and could build on these in college. (This was also a theme in Hub 2.)

For both Paul and John, Cohort 1 students at College 1, the pathway from school to college had **not gone according to their respective 'Plan As'**. In Paul's case, he

had planned to move from Year 11 to Sixth Form but had not achieved the necessary grades. For him, moving on to study at college was very much his 'Plan B'. This example illustrates the need to have different curriculum pathways open to young people, including those with autism, so that there can be positive options for 'Plan Bs'. John's Plan A had been the opposite: he had intended to move from Year 11 to college but had, according to him, been, 'bully-armed' in to attending Sixth Form instead. John's reported experience of his move to Sixth Form suggests the need to ensure that good, person-centred transition planning and a comprehensive Local Offer are put in place for Year 11 leavers who may continue their education in a school Sixth Form, as well as those moving on to college. John was delighted to have moved on to college and was greatly enjoying his course there. He had, however, perceived the 'Right Course Review' as the college testing him and had been rather stressed by the fear that he might be told to leave. This suggests a need to explain more clearly to all learners, especially those with autism, the purposes of such a course review.

6.2 Curriculum pathways at College 2

College 2 had opened its redeveloped centre for learners with severe and complex needs in September 2013, while the Finished at School Cohort 1 were still at school. Thus the curriculum offer for Cohort 1 learners with complex autism was for individually timetabled, personalised curricula. The curriculum offer included independent living, performing arts, media skills, art for communication, business enterprise skills and horticulture. The College 2 lead emphasised that the biggest challenge for the college had been the reality of delivering **individualised curriculum pathways** that matched areas of learner strengths and weaknesses across the curriculum levels. Thus, rather than being placed on a Level 1 course, for example, each learner studied each part of the curriculum at an appropriate level to ensure progression from prior learning. This approach was reported as taking a lot of time and effort to track progress and to create teaching and learning resources to ensure opportunities for progression. The result was that the college had had to employ more support staff to create these, 'bespoke resources'. The College 2 lead raised the issue that this individualised curriculum was required to be funded at a higher level as it was, 'specialist support in a mainstream environment'.

In College 2, **transition out of college** was a focus in the curriculum planning from early on in a learner's life at the college. The college had sought funding to employ a

Job Coach and had run a Transition event to introduce learners to employers and other providers relevant to life after college.

The three school leads in Hub 2 were **very positive** about the curriculum offer at College 2. For example, the lead from School 13 deemed it to have, 'a very wide curriculum and a very wide options base'. The college's willingness to design **individualised programmes of study** that included work experience was valued, for example by the lead from School 7. Existing links with feeder schools, plus new links made or enhanced with the hub schools, ensured that the college was aware of the curriculum offer in its feeder schools and was therefore able to build on that to offer **progression** in college. The five-day offer in the specialist centre at College 2 was greatly welcomed. The **investment** in these facilities at the college was, according to the School 7 lead, the reason that numbers of students choosing out-of-borough independent specialist colleges had reduced: 'Now [College 2] is regarded as an appropriate placement and not one that parents fight'.

In the mainstream part of College 2, however, the curriculum offer remained 3.5 days, leaving parents with 1.5 days to fill for their son or daughter. School 9 had sought to address this by increasing its focus on gaining **work placements** for its students whilst still in school that could be continued or developed once in college.

Curriculum pathways were not yet meeting the needs expressed by some **Cohort 2** students though. The parents of Zara, a Cohort 2 student at School 9, had spoken of their daughter's desire to study cooking during Sixth Form (Y12-Y14), something the school was not able to offer. Perhaps in response to this, through the hub, School 9 began to explore the possibilities of **enriching the curriculum offer in Sixth Forms locally** by partnering up with other local special schools. David explained that he would like to study Hair and Beauty at College 2 but had been unable to do a link course in that vocational area. As a result, it was unlikely that he would go on to that course in September 2015.

Helen, a Cohort 1 student at College 2, was on a course that enabled her to try out a number of different options. She appreciated this opportunity as she had no clear single sense of what she would like to focus on for her future.

6.3 Curriculum pathways at College 3

Because of the Finished at School programme, College 3 had developed a **planned specialist course for learners with autism**. However, during the timeframe of the programme, this had not reached fruition. The course had not been completely ready in time for Cohort 1 and so was withdrawn from the curriculum offer. For Cohort 2 learners also, there were no guarantees being offered that the course would definitely run – this depended on student numbers being sufficient to make it financially viable. In the view of School 6 lead, this lack of certainty was not appreciated by parents, but they noted that: 'If [the course] *could* be guaranteed, that would alleviate so many [parental] anxieties.'

As an illustration of why such a course would be appreciated, the School 6 lead told of a former pupil returning to visit the school to talk to Year 11 pupils (Cohort 2). This young man, described as, 'high functioning Asperger's', had been included in a College 3 course for students with special needs, some of whom (according to the young man) were frequently, 'kicking off'. The reported response to this student's distress by College 3 staff had been to, 'just ignore it'. In the view of the School 6 lead, this story illustrated that such a group, 'was not the best setting for [our pupils] and therefore was quite a big step back'. The need for the specialist, 'autism-friendly' course to become part of the College 3 offer was also underlined by the local transitions officer interviewed who said, 'We need delivery on that promise'.

Also because of the Finished at School programme, specifically because of Day 4 of the training - which in Hub 3 focused on non-accredited learning – College 3 had trialled the inclusion of **non-accredited learning** within the range of options from which students could choose, 'to create their own personal timetable'.

Four of the young men interviewed from Cohort 1 at College 3 were doing a **Work-related learning course**. From their views expressed in the interview, all seemed to be at the right level of work. At the time of interview, one of them, Jay, was learning about jobs in the retail sector. His heart was, however, set on a job in the music industry. This industry was not one of the ones sampled on the course. Trevor, a fifth young man from Cohort 1 at the college, wished, with hindsight, that he had achieved his Level 1 English at school as this qualification would have enabled him to have **more choice** of curriculum pathways at college. He too was on a **Work Skills course**, doing tasters of different vocational areas, plus Maths and English. He would have liked to have been able to choose a course that prepared him for a 'trade' but

that pathway required Level 1 English. However, the curriculum pathways were in place to enable him to go on to learn a trade so long as he achieved Level 1 English.

6.4 Curriculum pathways at College 4

The Finished at School programme had resulted in College 4 having a greater focus on **progression**, especially progression from Entry Level to Level 1 and, for those for whom this was realistic⁴⁶, a progression to **employment**. In time for Cohort 1 learners, the college lead reported, the Entry level curriculum in Maths and English was further differentiated to support progression. In time for Cohort 2, the college had created an 'Inclusive Learning Programme Offer' handbook, setting out various pathways through a three year curriculum, with opportunities available for a fourth year for those with Year 3 outcomes at a suitable level. Figure 13 summarises the offer.

Figure 13 Inclusive learning curriculum offer at College 4 (2015-16)

Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4*
Communication & Independence	Communication & Independence	Pathway to Employment	Supported Internship
Independent Living	Independent Living	Independent Living	Traineeship
Personal Progress	Carousel of vocational tasters	Vocational pathways ⁴⁷	Mainstream college
	Specialist autism provision	Specialist autism provision	Prince's Trust
			Employment
			Volunteering

*eligibility based on Y1-Y3 outcomes

Source: College 4 handbook (used with permission)

The college lead also spoke about the college's focus on ensuring young people with learning difficulties and disabilities were encouraged and supported to prepare for employment as adults. This was evidenced by the fact that the college employed a

⁴⁶ For some students at the college, learning at below Entry level, a goal of future employment would not be realistic.

⁴⁷ Retail; Hospitality & Catering; Multimedia; Sport: Performing Arts

Job Coach and had 12 learners involved with Project Search⁴⁸ on Supported Internships into employment in the hospitality and catering sector. This focus on preparing for adult employment was broader than, but included, learners with autism.

College 4's curriculum pathways included a **specialist autism option**: a two year course. The tutor in the specialist autism provision explained that the focus there was on **transition** all the time: transition in to the provision, transition on to the next level of learning and transition out of college in to the adult world. In this way, person-centred planning was carried out to ensure that there was progression from the specialist option to **mainstream curriculum pathways** in the college and to **employment** and/or **volunteering** after college.

The **curriculum within the specialist autism option** reflected an awareness that, 'with autism, there's a lot [of everyday communication skills] that need to be formally taught'. Hence the curriculum included **a set module on Autism Awareness** but was also designed to be **flexible** so that part of the curriculum content would be based on specific needs identified by each new cohort of learners. For example, 2014-15 learners had indicated a need to learn how to chat and this had been included as part of the curriculum. The tutor there argued that this formal teaching of social interaction skills could also be included in mainstream college courses, either as modules in a programme of study, or by enabling regular access to sessions with a mentor or counsellor. The aim was, also, that **the way** in which content was taught would be adapted to suit the needs and preferences of individual learners. For example, content could be taught by making use of a learner's specific interest and by providing a daily choice of modes of teaching and learning (e.g. visual, written, verbal).

This tutor also trained other college staff to be more aware of learners with autism. She reported that she told **mainstream college staff** teaching set curricular content that the '**personalised**' aspect could be added in for learners with autism by arranging regular sessions with mentors or counsellors which could focus on, for example, handling anxiety and working on social interaction. **Differentiation**, in her view, should be based on asking the learner what worked well for them. She emphasised to mainstream college staff the importance of giving learners with autism

⁴⁸ Project Search prepares young people with learning difficulties for employment. More information can be found here: http://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/PfA_Information%20Leaflets_supported%20internship.pdf

many opportunities to practice **exercising voice and choice**, in recognition of the fact that many had had previous negative experiences of education.

Sukisha was the only Cohort 1 student interviewed at College 4. She attended the specialist autism option at College 4 and planned to stay there for a second year. Sukisha then hoped to move on to a mainstream course at the college. At the time of the interview, she had not decided between going on to study Multimedia or Hairdressing. Either of these routes, she hoped, would enable her to gain employment after college.

6.5 Chapter summary

This chapter reported the development of the curriculum offer in each of the four hub colleges, as a result of the Finished at School programme. Examples included College 1's development of an Entry Level 1 programme that enabled it to cater for learners with complex autism who previously would not have been able to find a general FE college place in that local area; College 2's focus on implementing individualised programmes of study; College 3's trialling of non-accredited learning options to support personalisation of the curriculum; and College 4's major overhaul of its 'inclusive learning' offer which would benefit learners, including those with complex autism, from 2015 onwards (i.e. in time for Cohort 2 learners). The overall finding was that the programme stimulated all four hub colleges to enhance individualised curriculum pathways with learners with autism in mind. Planning for the next transition began early on in these colleges and there was a much stronger focus on preparing for adulthood.

7 INCREASED ACCESS TO COLLEGE LIFE

This chapter is structured by the five themes relating to access to college life that emerged from the interviews with professionals, parents and young people. These themes are:

- Travelling to college.
- The college environment.
- Unstructured time at college.
- Using college facilities.
- Social relations at college.

7.1 Travelling to college

The ability to **travel safely to college** independently or otherwise was a necessary condition for accessing college. As Zara's case testifies (see Chapter 4, section 4.2.1.1) an inability to travel to college independently may be perceived by some as a barrier to gaining a place at college. To address this barrier, for young people where it was appropriate to their developmental profile, there was agreement among the school and college leads that **safe opportunities to practice** the journey from home to college and back again were required.

College 2 included **travel training** as part of its curriculum for learners with severe and complex needs. This was offered at levels to suit individuals: starting from road safely and moving on to a single journey by bus, a single journey by train, and then more complex journeys, involving changes, for those where this was appropriate.

In the home local authority of College 3, a local project to support young people, including those with autism, to learn how to use public transport safely had reportedly been cut back, affecting Cohort 2. This meant that school, college and parents were having to find other ways around this. In Nikita's case (Chapter 4, Section 4.2.1.2), for example, Nikita's mother had agreed to support the independent travel target in Nikita's plan but the school lead was aware that Nikita's mother was worried about this and therefore the school would also need to find ways to support this. Cohort 1 students already at College 3 had benefitted from the travel project. For example, Trevor reported that, as part of his link visits to college, he had been supported to learn to travel by bus independently. Then his parents had supported him to find out which bus number he needed to catch from home to reach college. Kevin, also at

College 3, explained that he had received bus training at school to enable him to travel to college independently.

Among the Cohort 1 young people across the Finished at School programme interviewed, a **minority** travelled independently to college or travelled part of the way in a parent's car and the rest of the way independently by bus. Helen, at College 2, for example, said that after a few times of missing her connecting bus, her mother started taking her the first part of the journey, dropping her off at the right bus stop. From the end of that journey, she then walked the rest of the way to college. The **majority** travelled by taxi arranged as part of their support package through their respective local authorities.

Among those travelling independently by bus, one (John, College 1) reported being subjected to **social interactions on the bus** that confused him. He reported that there were, 'guys on the bus who keep asking me awkward questions'. He tried to ignore this but admitted, 'they're getting on my nerves'. When asked, he said that he did not know to whom at college he could talk about this issue. Kayleigh, at College 2, also reported being name-called and 'bullied' by other young people at the bus stop and on the bus because she had learning difficulties. Kayleigh had not previously mentioned this to anyone at college. These cases indicate a need to ensure that young people with autism understand that the college takes bullying seriously; that learners know staff to whom they can talk about bullying; and that social interaction issues occurring during time travelling to and from college can legitimately be discussed with their college tutor or mentor.

For some young people living in rural areas, regardless of whether they travelled independently or by arranged taxi, one issue was the sheer **length of the journey** they had to make to access college. For example, some said that the length of their journey meant that they did not want to extend their day further in order to access any clubs or activities after classes.

7.2 The college environment

For many young people with autism, the large, noisy, busy college environment can be a high barrier to accessing college life. For parents, too, the physical environment can be off-putting when they think about the sensory needs of their son or daughter with autism. Experiences such as that reported by Theo's mother in relation to Theo's first link course, only reinforce such perceptions (Figure 14; see also Chapter 4,

Section 4.2.1.3) The Finished at School programme enabled the four college hubs to understand this issue, to become **more autism-aware and increasingly autism-friendly**, although there were constraints as to which aspects of the physical college environment that could be adapted.

Figure 14 One young man's negative experience: an illustration of why the Finished at School programme was necessary

'[Theo's] experience at day release, which was at [a local FE college⁴⁹], one day a week, had been disastrous, truly, truly disastrous. It was too big, it was too noisy. For Theo, and this is what's extremely interesting, it's not just how he's taught, it's the geographical setting, the size of rooms, the whole how his day begins. If he has to walk through a large, open, echoey space, we've lost him for the day.

So although [this college] was where all of his peers in his year group were going to go, it was so clearly not going to be right for Theo. He was desperately unhappy. He ended up having to have one-to-one support completely. And most of his time was spent outside of the room in a quiet room because he was overwhelmed, completely overwhelmed, sensorily. He just became very disruptive. When he is distressed, he can become very disruptive and noisy and completely unable to relate to anybody.

Source: interview with Theo's mother, December 2014

The physical environment of the four hub colleges differed in the challenges presented to adapt to the needs of young people with complex autism. Indeed, each campus of each college differed in this way. The focus of changes to the college environments therefore also differed from hub to hub but the intent was the same in each: to make such changes that could be made in order **to minimise anxiety and sensory overload** and **maximise safe access** for learners with autism.

Prior to the Finished at School project, College 2 had benefitted from large-scale investment in a purpose-built centre to cater for learners with severe and complex

⁴⁹ Not a college involved in the Finished at School programme.

needs, including those with complex autism. This opened in September 2013. Four Finished at School learners with complex autism attended this centre from September 2014 (Cohort 1). The facilities available in this **purpose-built environment** that were particularly relevant to young people with autism included:

- A small room that had resources for use by learners with autism that were either hyper-sensitive and required calming down or hypo-sensitive and required alerting activities. This facility was accessed with the learner's one-to-one assistant.
- A medical/therapy room where a speech and language therapist could work one-to-one with learners with autism, including those with non-verbal communication. This room also had resources for alerting activities.

The centre also included facilities to teach a wide range of curriculum areas, including an independent living suite (with kitchen, laundry and bedroom facilities where everyday skills of independence could be practiced, such as planning meals, shopping, cooking, eating with others, laundry, bed-making et cetera), a media suite, a theatre where regular performances were staged, and an art studio.

Other hub colleges had to start more or less from scratch in **adapting the physical environment** to the needs of learners with complex autism. To support the needs of learners with autism who found the college environment over-stimulating, College 1 created an autism-friendly communal area (known as the 'Hub'), built a new quiet area off the main student recreation area and set aside an area in the Entry level 1 area as a quiet area. For College 3, the lead reported that the biggest challenge was making the physical environment more appropriate for learners with autism:

'In our [Town] campus I think the biggest challenge has been around the accommodation meeting their needs. Each one of our three campuses are very different in terms of their set up and the accommodation that's available. Of the students that came through into our [Town] campus, I think the thing that we've had to think about, and the thing that we've responded to, is around how we provide safe spaces and safe environments that are quieter and more responsive to those kind of sensory overload, those levels of anxiety levels, whilst making sure that those students still feel that they're part of a mainstream environment and they're still included in a general further education college, they're not just being parked out of the way in a room

somewhere. We've made quite a lot of changes in [Town] campus to be able to accommodate some of those needs.'

(College 3 lead)

The 'sorts of changes' referred to in the quotation above included:

- Identifying rooms that were relatively close to Reception that were then 'repurposed' to become an autism-specific communal area (known as the Gateway) that was quieter than other college areas.
- Relocating Foundation Studies and the Foundation Studies staffroom to be very close to this new Gateway – thus Entry Level students did not have to move around the college to get to different lessons and staff were always nearby if any issues arose.
- Building a new space to create a little kitchenette for learners with autism who accessed the mainstream curriculum to use at break-times.
- Near that kitchenette, a single-use office was 'repurposed' to create a small sensory room that could be used by these mainstream students to stimulate or to calm as appropriate – it had bean bags and could be used as a quiet, dark place or with sensory lights. It was accessed only by students who had had a key fob for it signed out to them, carried on their college ID lanyard.
- Removing noisy hand-dryers from the toilets.

College 4 had a specific building that was adapted to be suited to learners with autism. However, it was only accessed by those following the two-year autism-specific course. The college lead reported that, for learners with autism studying other courses, there were no **quiet areas**. A planned move (in time for Cohort 2 students to benefit) created the opportunity to address this for students studying within the Inclusive Learning department. For the 2015-16 cohort, provision suited to learners with, 'complex and high functioning' autism was due to be available at two campuses. This included, for example, quiet rooms, sensory rooms and assistive technologies for communication.

The college leads were all careful to ensure that, in making adaptations, such as creating autism-specific quiet areas, and in creating specialist centres for complex needs more broadly, students were not segregated from college life. For example, one school lead in Hub 2 was concerned that, 'the lovely new provision', at that college could lead to young people with autism, 'becoming separated from the

mainstream college life'. However, another school representative from the same hub reported that students at the centre were, 'not segregated. Once parents visit that centre, they feel more comfortable too'.

Autism-aware and autism-friendly adaptations to the college environments could only go so far. There were limits on what could be changed about a mainstream college environment. As a result, school leads even within the same hub varied in their views about the success of adaptations with, for example, one lead in Hub 3 arguing that the hub college, 'is not autism friendly. A big college like that *can't* be'; whilst another lead in the same hub enthusiastically listed the autism-friendly changes made at the college. Nevertheless, the Finished at School programme demonstrated that such changes **enabled access to college** for young people with complex autism who would otherwise have required to attend specialist provision, albeit that for many, this was only possible with the addition of one-to-one support.

The Cohort 1 young people interviewed were mainly positive about their respective college environments. For a couple of the students interviewed, the requirement to wear an identity card on a lanyard round their neck was a sensory irritant but one that was bearable. For another student, Helen at College 2, the fact that college had no school bells ringing was a big plus. Jay at College 3 liked the quiet places that had been specifically created as a result of the Finished at School programme but he also said that he sometimes liked being in the bigger communal spaces at college. Sukisha, in autism specific provision at College 4, appreciated this 'calmer' area versus the 'crazy', 'insane' environment of the mainstream college areas.

7.3 Unstructured time at college

One of the important differences between school and college was that **college was not full-time**, five days a week. The closer links between the schools and colleges in the hubs meant that students and their parents were made aware of this in advance, during transition planning reviews and college visits. Parents and young people were encouraged to plan constructive ways to use this time for, for example, volunteering or work experience. Some school leads mentioned that they found preparing students with autism for this increase in unstructured time was difficult within the school environment.

Several of the Cohort 1 young people interviewed mentioned that they had more free time to fill during the week than they were used to at school. Some enjoyed the

opportunity for a lie in on their 'day off' from college: others did not like the break in their weekday routine. For this reason, Kevin, at College 3, would have preferred a Friday as his day off, rather than a Tuesday, so that he could have had a routine of three days not at college, followed by four days at college.

During college days, there was also **unstructured time during lunch and break times**. These times were when the students interviewed tended to use the autism-specific quieter communal areas. For example, In College 1, Paul said that he liked to go to the Hub at lunchtime to play on his laptop but he also bought food from the canteen to eat in the Hub. John also reported that, 'we all go to the Hub and eat our food there. It's a hangout area.' In College 2, also, Kayleigh reported that she enjoyed using the centre's, 'common room with games'.

Other students, for example, Helen at College 2, used mainstream college facilities, such as the college library, as a quiet place to go at lunch and break times, or, like Trevor and his friends in College 3, used the main canteen or went off-site to visit local shops to buy food at lunchtimes. These young men enjoyed the greater freedom they had at college compared to school. Another young man at the same college, Kevin, was in a group of learners who were not allowed to go off-site for safety reasons. Kevin was not very happy about that. However, he described spending lunchtimes as follows, illustrating a nice mix of use of mainstream and autism-specific facilities:

'We buy stuff in the shop at college and then we eat it sitting in a café-related area or we go outside or sit in the Gateway. [...] The Gateway is a little bit of the college especially for autism children and the staff there are friendlier than the staff outside of the Gateway.'

(Kevin, College 2)

Sukisha, at College 4, reported, 'liking my own space'. At lunchtimes, she went by herself to a small coffee shop within the mainstream entrance area to achieve this.

In College 2, learning from the previous year of piloting individualised timetables had introduced **a more structured start to the day** in time for Cohort 1 students to benefit. Instead of 'milling around' at the start of the day, each learner in the purpose-built centre went to a base room where his or her one-to-one learning assistant would go through the individual's visual timetable or 'now and next' boards and/or take the opportunity to do alerting or calming activities as necessary.

7.4 Using 'mainstream' college facilities

Across the hubs, it was apparent that college staff worked to ensure that the learners with autism were not marooned in autism-specific areas but **included** into college life, accessing mainstream college facilities, such as the library, cafes, the canteen, and sports facilities. There was evidence from interviews with college staff and with the young people from Cohort 1 that such facilities were routinely accessed. College staff knew that the students with autism might need to access these facilities in small burst of, say, 15 to 20 minutes at first, and that the attitudes of others towards them also needed to be addressed; for example, perceptions that these learners could be, 'too noisy'. To support inclusion, the autism-specific 'Gateway' in College 3 was deliberately placed to look over the mainstream atrium area where the main student refectory was situated. In this way, as the college lead explained, students with autism could see what that looked like, 'without experiencing the nose and the open feeling', and could decide, in their own time, to take the next step of going downstairs to access it.

The College 1 lead also reported that staff encouraged learners with autism to leave the haven of their own 'Hub' area to use the main canteen at least one day a week. To support this, they were able to access the canteen at times when it was less busy.

None of the Cohort 1 students interviewed reported making use of **sports facilities** or of being part of any **mainstream clubs** at college. In part, as mentioned in Section 7.1 above, this was to do with travel arrangements but perhaps this is an area where inclusion into mainstream college life could be further supported. It may also be an area of inclusion into college life that will develop organically, once the Cohort 1 learners have been at college for longer.

7.5 Social relations at college

Parents, such as David's father (see Chapter 4, Section 4.2.1.1) were concerned that their son or daughter would be vulnerable to **bullying** at college. As he said: 'You do just worry slightly because you can't be with them all the time and [college] is a big place'.

The College 4 lead said that the college was aware of the possibility that learners with autism could be a target for bullying and therefore ensured that there were staff around to **guide and safeguard** against this. The specialist autism tutor there also

talked about the importance of giving **support around social interaction**, of formally teaching young people who wanted to be able to interact more successfully how to chat and how to make friends (see Chapter 6, section 6.4). On the other hand, she was a strong advocate of the **right** of those young people with autism who did not wish to be sociable and who were happy by themselves to remain as 'loners'. She argued that it was only if a young person wanted social interaction and did not know how to do it successfully that formal teaching of these skills would be appropriate.

Of the Cohort 1 students interviewed, two mentioned negative social interaction incidents that happened during travel to and from college (see Section 7.1). Kayleigh at College 2 was the only one to speak about being bullied in college. (Others reported histories of being bullied at school.) According to Kayleigh, she was sometimes pushed about and laughed at. She said her 'one-to-one' told her to ignore it but, in her view, 'It's very hard to ignore. I feel I want to take my anger out on them'. Despite this, Kayleigh reported liking college better than school. She said she had fun with her friends and enjoyed playing games in the common room. This theme, of **new friendships and a bigger social circle**, came up in most of the interviews with the young people. For example, Luke at College 3 talked about there being, 'a lot more people to communicate with' at college but reported that he had met new people and made new friends, 'really good ones; I've made loads of new friends'. This was a typical comment.

7.6 Chapter summary

This chapter focused on five themes affecting access to college life that arose during the interviews with professionals, parents and young people. For each theme, there were examples where the Finished at School programme had led to progress in relation to previous barriers. In terms of travelling to college, school and college leads agreed that, where it was developmentally appropriate, opportunities to practice travelling safely on public transport were necessary to enable independent travel to and from college. Where independent travel was not appropriate, or had not yet been achieved, Cohort 1 learners had a support package that included transport to college. This was progress compared to the experience of Zara's parents who had previously been told that Zara's inability to travel independently to college indicated that college was not suitable for her.

Before the Finished at School programme, there was evidence that the environment of a general FE college could be a barrier to accessing college for some young

people with autism. Stimulated by the programme, each of the four college hubs made adaptations to the environment designed to minimise environmental triggers for anxiety and sensory overload and to maximise safe access for learners with autism.

The greater knowledge of college life built up for the Cohort 1 learners and school staff through the Finished at School programme also helped to prepare these learners for the increase in unstructured time at college compared to school. For example, the fact that college was not a five-days-per-week provision was discussed in transition reviews at school. College staff, too, became more aware of the needs of some learners with autism to have somewhere quiet to go during unstructured times such as at the start of the day and during the breaks and lunch-times. Providing a structured start to the day and providing quieter, autism-specific communal areas were examples of the adaptations made to remove this as a potential barrier to young people with autism thriving at college.

Any concern that autism-specific facilities would result in learners with autism not accessing mainstream facilities at the hub colleges proved unfounded. Across all four hub colleges there was evidence that the Cohort 1 learners routinely accessed mainstream facilities such as the library, cafes, canteen, and sports facilities.

Concerns about how young people with autism would fare in terms of social interaction within the environment of the general FE colleges were recognised as a potential barrier to accessing college. Some experiences, reported by a minority of the Cohort 1 learners interviewed, indicated that this could be a challenge. Equally, it was one that staff in the four hub colleges sought to address: for example, through enhanced safeguarding and guidance, through tutor and mentor support, and through explicit teaching of social interaction skills. In most of the interviews with 12 Cohort 1 young people, the pleasures of new friendships and wider social circles at college were mentioned.

8 CONCLUSIONS

It is clear from the evaluation data collected that the Finished at School programme was a success. The training on person-centred planning and reviews was welcomed by the four hubs and was effective in increasing knowledge about person-centred approaches and in inspiring positive changes in practice, including a greater involvement of parents and young people in person-centred planning. The hub-based work was valued for creating both new and enhanced relationships locally, and as an arena for sharing good practice and ideas. The programme increased understanding of the practical implications of the Children and Families Act 2014 and the new SEND Code of Practice 0-25. The opportunity, created by the programme, to focus on improving transition for young people with autism had a positive impact on day-to-day practice in the schools and colleges and also generalised to improve transition for young people with other special educational needs. Regarding Cohort 1, it was clear that young people who would not otherwise have done so, moved on from school to a general further education college. All 45 Cohort 1 learners moved on to positive post-school destinations. This was a major achievement, underpinned by improved person-centred planning.

For those Cohort 1 learners who moved on to the hub colleges, there was evidence that these colleges had improved assessment processes. College staff gathered more and better information earlier about the young people with autism who planned to move to the college. This enabled staff to plan ahead and to provide appropriately for these learners' needs. There was also evidence of positive developments in the curriculum pathways available for young people with autism, and of a greater focus on preparing for adulthood. Aspects that had previously been perceived as barriers to college for young people with autism were systematically addressed: for example, where possible, autism-friendly adaptations were made to the physical environment to reduce sensory overload and triggers for anxiety.

In short, the Finished at School programme has demonstrated that, with locally coordinated person-centred transition planning, reasonable adjustments, and appropriate support, many more young people with complex autism can access local college life successfully.

9 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the data collected for the evaluation of the Finished at School programme, we make the following recommendations.

9.1 Recommendations to Ambitious about Autism and its partners

- Ambitious about Autism and its partners, nasen and the Association of Colleges, should seek to continue the work promoting positive, person-centred, outcome-focused transition planning for young people with autism.
- The work should expand to encompass, not only the transition pathways from school to college or training for work, but also from college or training to a fulfilling adult life.
- Ambitious about Autism should continue to promote its College Inclusion Charter, appropriately updated to take account of the Children and Families Act 2014.
- Ambitious about Autism and its partners should encourage relevant staff in all secondary schools and general further education colleges to access training in person-centred approaches and training in understanding the implications of autism for learners and for educational providers.

9.2 Recommendations to Local Authorities (including commissioners) and partners

- Local authorities should support the creation of 'Finished at School'-style partnership hubs to enable a strategic focus on successful transition to further education or training for local young people with autism.
- Local authorities, working with relevant partners including parents and young people, should ensure that the Local Offer includes local post-school provision to support the aspirations of all local young people with autism, across the full autism spectrum, so that young people with autism are not forced to move out of area in order to access appropriate post-school education.

9.3 Recommendations to general Further Education colleges

- In relation to young people with autism, the general further education sector should, as part of the duty to, *'use their best endeavours to secure the special*

*educational provision that the young person needs*⁵⁰, learn from the good practice approaches to transition from school to college, as exemplified in the Finished at School programme.⁵¹

- Through the development of individual EHC plans every further education college should work with its feeder local authorities to support strategic planning for successful post-school transitions for young people with autism. This practice should support the transition for all young people with autism including those who do not have EHC plans.
- Further education colleges should work with Local Authorities to ensure that specific information about courses and facilities for potential and existing learners with autism is part of the Local Offer.
- Each further education college should, as far as possible, enable young people with autism to have opportunities to find out about the range of courses offered at college, recognising that the young people may need support from parents or school and/or college staff to take up these opportunities. College staff should be aware of and act upon the requirement to have a bespoke transition plan in place for each young person with autism wishing to attend a college.
- Further Education colleges should develop outcomes-focused personalised study programmes based on the aspirations in individual's Education, Health and Care plan.
- As far as possible, each college should plan alongside feeder local authorities and schools to ensure that a college representative is invited to attend, and attends, annual reviews from Year 9 onwards for any learner with complex autism who is likely to transition to the college.
- To support the requirements of the Equality Act 2010, and the Children and Families Act 2014, every general further education college should make 'best endeavours'⁵² to include in its Quality and Improvement Plan and Equality and Diversity policies a commitment to staff training on autism awareness and to embedding effective practice supporting learners with autism. All staff in

⁵⁰ Paragraph 7.3 of the *Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0-25 years* (July 2014)

⁵¹ For details of such approaches, see O'Brien, A. (2015). *Supporting Young People with Autism to Move from School to College. Learning from Ambitious about Autism's Finished at School Programme*. London: Ambitious about Autism.

⁵² Paragraph 7.3 of the *Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0-25 years* (July 2014)

general further education colleges should have access to at least awareness-raising training on autism from a credible provider.

9.4 Recommendations to senior leaders in secondary schools

- All secondary schools should adopt as far as possible the good practice in transition planning recommended in the *SEND Code of Practice 0-25 years* and highlighted by the Finished at School programme.
- All secondary schools should ensure that, from Year 9 onwards, young people with autism and their parents are supported to be involved in person-centred planning for transition to further education or training after the end of schooling.
- All secondary schools should allocate time to the special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) or another appropriate staff member to work with the local authority and relevant partners, including local further education colleges, to support strategic and operational planning for successful post-school transitions for young people with autism, including passing on information to colleges about the young people's educational achievements, areas for development and autism-specific support needs.
- All staff in secondary schools should have access to at least awareness-raising training on autism from a credible provider, such as the Autism Education Trust, and time to embed new or enhanced learning into practice.
- All relevant staff in secondary schools should have access to training in person-centred ways of working with young people, including those with autism, and time allocated to embed new or enhanced learning into practice.
- All secondary schools should endeavour to support joint working/training between mainstream and special schools to enable the mutual sharing of teaching expertise and of person-centred approaches to preparing young people, including those with autism, for transition from school.